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MISS ELVESTER'S GIRLS.

187

A NOVEL.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF 'BY-WAYS.'

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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MISS ELVESTER'S GIRLS.



CHAPTER I.

HOW THE ROUND PEG GOT INTO THE SQUARE HOLE.

'I will a round unvarnished tale deliver
Of my whole course of love.'

TANDALANE, an old-fashioned, white-washed house on the Auchterbrechan shore, with fuchsias against the walls and pinks under the windows, had been taken by Mrs Brackenburn for the months of July and August, while her husband and her husband's friend, Donald Berwick, spent their furlough travelling about Russia. Mrs Brackenburn and Ur-

sula Elvester sat now in the queerly-furnished, low-roofed Standalane drawing-room ; the first on the old-fashioned, high-backed sofa, the other close to one of the narrow windows.

An absent look had stolen over Ursula's face, and her hands were unmindful of the needle-work with which half-an-hour since they had been busy. As for Mrs Brackenburn, she had been dutifully reading Hallam's 'Middle Ages,' with a view to improve her mind, but idle fancies having come between her and 'The condition of the ceorls,' she had closed her book now. It was nearly time for the postman's evening call, and she, possessing her soul in patience, was awaiting that event. But the letter by-and-by brought to her was not the letter for which she was weary, neither did it at all stand in the stead of that. She frowned over it, threw it from her discontentedly, then got up and went to the side of Ursula, saying,—

'Weep with me ; for again the post has been, and I have got no letter from my husband.'

‘ But it can so easily be accounted for,’ said Ursula. ‘ Dr Brackenburn must be beyond the bounds of civilisation ; somewhere out of the reach of post-offices, I suppose.’

‘ We can suppose anything we like, but supposing doesn’t take the sharp edge off vexation, nor prevent me from feeling as “ quite disappointet,” as my last cook did when she found she wasn’t to have a private sitting-room. But, look here! Dugald Urquhart has “ dropped a line ” (odious phrase ; as bad in its way as any of the “ whom not to know argues oneself unknown,” and “ conspicuous by absence ” company), to tell me that he has been cruising about our coast in a friend’s yacht for some time, and will be at Standalane to - night. Glad or sorry, Ursula ? ’

‘ Mr Urquhart is your cousin,’ said Ursula ; ‘ that is enough.’

‘ Enough to make you glad ? ’

‘ No ; but to make me silent about him.’

‘ Yet I think I can guess what that silence covers, and I sympathise with you. My

husband says I have no reverence, but he is wrong. I own my superior whenever I recognise him. I would rather any day look up than look down, or even look level. Isn't it a delicious sensation when one meets a man such as this forty-second cousin of mine, whom one can really reverence ?'

'I don't know ; I can't tell ; I have not thought about it,' said Ursula. 'Won't you leave off fluttering round the room, Matilda, and come here ? The outlook is very lovely.'

And it was : the sky radiant—pink, orange, violet, barred and flecked with gold ; the Frith alive with breakers, its margin misty with the spray flung off by their breaking ; swiftly they rolled up the white beach, one following another in long, long foam-fringed lines, which the setting sun, casting his rays aslant, turned to transparent emerald as they ran.

'I see,' said Mrs Brackenburn, having responded to the invitation. 'And when Dugald comes, he will say fine things about Neptune's chargers tossing their foamy manes. But I can't talk prettily of the

beauties of nature. I shocked Mr Berwick not long since by thinking that a blending of soft ruby and pearl-grey, which he pointed out to me among the clouds, would look nice in wool-work. Should you suppose, Ursula, that Mr Berwick is an admirer of wool-work ?'

Ursula declined to commit herself to any statement concerning Mr Berwick, and called her friend's attention to the splendours of the sinking sun.

'It is lighting up the manse windows gloriously,' said Mrs Brackenburn, the perverse. 'See how they glint through the chestnuts and sycamores! A delightfully rambling old place that manse is; one of those houses which always set you imagining some story in connection with them. Don't you think it is a pity there should be no Mrs Berwick to enjoy such a pleasant habitation ?'

'Are not all manses pleasant habitations ?' said evasive Ursula.

'As well ask if all ministers are pleasant men, and all ministers' wives patterns to the

public !' cried Mrs Brackenburn. ' Now, all ministers are *not* pleasant men. I remember one whom I used to fear as I feared hobgoblins after dark. He was a survival ; he made the Sunday a weariness to me by the length and doctrinalness of his sermons ; and he caused me to learn the Shorter Catechism from end to end, so that I could repeat it like a parrot, though I hadn't an idea what it meant ;—I haven't much yet, to tell the truth. No good came of that discipline, somehow. I was a terrible child. Till I reached sixteen, I do believe my impression was that our parish of Haroldsbay, as well as all the region round, had been created for my special and particular amusement. There was no one to stand in a mother's place to me, no sister Jenny to keep me right ; and my too indulgent uncle and wild boy cousins encouraged me when I ought to have been checked and silenced. Be thankful for your sister Jenny, Ursula. I might have been a better member of society to-day, if in childhood I had had such a woman's care.'

‘What happened to you at sixteen?’ inquired Ursula. No talker herself, she liked to listen to the talk of Mrs Brackenburn.

‘What happened to me? Just what happens to most of us women one time or another.’

‘Would you mind telling me about it? I should like to hear your story, if I might.’

Mrs Brackenburn declared that she had no story, properly so called; but if Ursula wished to know how the round peg had got into the square hole, it was easy to tell. Such being indeed Ursula’s wish, Mrs Brackenburn, without further ado went on:—

‘When the old divine who taught me the Catechism had been fifty years in the ministry, he celebrated his jubilee, and immediately after slept with his fathers. His successor was an innovation. Under his rule alarming changes were made in our worship. Our ancient precentor, for instance, disappeared, and in his room came a young man who wore a blue necktie, and had some faint notion of the difference between a minim and a semibreve. The old folks

didn't like it; one worthy, I remember, retired to meditate among the tombs every time we sang, for she could not abide to hear the praises of the sanctuary chanted through a moustache. The psalmody approved of by Haroldsbay was, when we were not so rash as to make up our mind about what tune we had got, but were content to have a vague idea of St Neot's, with a suggestion of Babel's Streams here and there, and an after-thought of Balerma or Martyrs; and when the leader did not have the presumption to soar beyond the lower edge of any note he attempted, but hung on there flatly and waveringly for as long as he could hold out, then took his way to the next, up or down an ingenious ladder of nasal grace-notes, we following at whatever pace, and with whatever style of flourish we liked best. But it was the minister, not the precentor, I was going to talk about. Well, the minister—I can see him now!—was *not* clerical looking: he had a great dark shaggy head, an ugly attractive face, eyes that glowed like lamps under an awesome crag, and grand, im-

pressive gestures, not taught by any elocution master. His sermons were like no other sermons I have ever heard; pictures after Gustave Doré, with something gruesome in their gloom and something lurid in their light. To suit his action he had a rich rolling voice, and whatever he chose to say sounded grand—at least so I thought then; I don't know what might be my opinion now. One Sunday when my hero-worship was at its height, I went into church, to see an ordinary neutral-looking person, with eyes and hair of no particular colour, take possession of the pulpit. I was so provoked that, instead of attending to one word of what he had to say, I drew a wicked caricature of the preacher, which I passed round among the boys, who passed it to my governess, who as soon as we got home scolded me well. (Mademoiselle often did scold me for that misused talent of mine, calling my pencil an instrument of "veeckedness," and prophesying that if I should ever be shipwrecked on a desert island, I would certainly peel the skin from the palms of my hands rather than be

without something on which to draw "leetle gentlemen.") Next evening the stranger dined at our house. My governess happened to show him her collection of water-colour sketches; and what should he come upon there but my yesterday's portrait of himself, which mademoiselle, meaning to keep in memory of me, had put into her portfolio and forgotten! The minister took it up, looked at it critically, then looked as critically at me. "This is what I noticed you busy with in church," he said. "It is very clever and spirited indeed." Clever and spirited!—I had never been so ashamed as I was at that moment. My face flamed into such a scarlet that, as Jack said afterwards, it cast a fiery glow over all the room. As I made my ignominious escape, I heard mademoiselle apologising for me, and the minister saying, "Poor motherless little girl!" and I locked myself up in the dark, and cried till I was sick, to think that I was so wicked, and that I had no mother. The end of the matter was my going down, and before everybody expressing penitence for what I had done

and asking to be forgiven. I can't think *how* it was, but my husband has since sworn that he there and then fell in love with the pitiful, tear-stained little object who came pleading for pardon. I did not guess that at the time, of course ; indeed, in those days of romance I would not have condescended to any lover less pensive and heroic than Thaddeus of Warsaw or Sir William Wallace of "The Scottish Chiefs." But I told my new friend, I remember, that I should like to live always near him, as I might so perhaps manage to be a little good, or at any rate a little less bad. Years passed, and I was with relatives in Edinburgh, when chance—Providence, I should say—once more threw Dr Brackenburn and me together. I had still the same feeling about the possibility of being better than I was, if I could always live near him ; only I did not tell him of it now. Shortly after I had gone home, my uncle invited Dr Brackenburn to Haroldsbay. Our house was full. We had a man who wanted to marry me, and one or two others who

thought it a passable enough amusement to laugh with me, and a couple of worldly-wise matrons who used to talk to me for my good (how one does enjoy being talked to for one's good!), and a few girls who thanked heaven seven times a day that they were not as Matilda Cameron. The grave scholar could have little in common with these; yet when he was asked, he came. I had an intuition why, and it made me afraid of Dr Brackenburn, so that I kept myself constantly surrounded by my gay friends, when all the while—but no matter; I don't care to think, much less to speak, of my behaviour then; so let it pass. Haroldsbay is one vast peat-bog, and so flat all round about, that you have only to mount a table to see the whole county. The coast scenery is worth looking at, however; and as we had nothing else to show, we took our visitors to all the lighthouses within reach. One day we set out to inspect a cave to which there was no royal road; indeed, with us, as in your Shetland, if royalty wanted to see any of

our finest sights, it would have to go to them afoot like the meanest of its subjects. Our way led across a succession of headlands which forms part of the northern selvedge of Scotland. Our descent was by a "goe," veiled with a tangle of flowers and ferns and grasses; and desperately, dankly uncomfortable, with unexpected rills trickling from unseen watersheds; and all the way down set thick with pitfalls for unsure feet. After getting to the bottom, there remained a congregation of smooth round boulders as big as cottages to be clambered over before the cave was reached. I was used to such work, and the other girls were not; so without my being able to help it, Dr Brackenburn and I got separated from the rest, and arrived first. The cavern was an opening in the solid rock, like a cathedral aisle, except that the massivest of man's masonry would be as nothing compared to it. A narrow chink at the farther end gave us a peep of gloomy sky, and a glimpse of still gloomier sea tumbling about sullenly. After standing in

silence for a minute, I made my way over the intervening stones towards this passage, and when it was reached, called back, "I am going to surprise the gulls and gannets, so good-bye." Dr Brackenburn begged me to desist, or at any rate to delay till he should join me; but I laughed and passed through alone. The tide was full. One crag, only one, showed above water. With a leap I reached it—foolhardiness, not bravery, I know; but something uncanny had taken possession of me that day—and so stood on about a square yard of rock; cliffs, I can't tell how high, overhanging me, and the Atlantic licking the slippery sea-weed round my feet. I should not have cared to confess how I shuddered as I looked down into the green gulf of water which one false step would convert into a grave; nor how I felt when Dr Brackenburn, a moment or two later, appeared in the aperture. Before he could say one word I was at his side. In getting back I ought to have fallen in and he to have drawn me out, to make it tell well; but it was not so;

nothing but plainest prose has ever befallen me. Seeing me stand safely before the fissure, he said, "If I had any right to scold you, I would exercise it: one degree less sure-footed, and you must have been there" (pointing below) "at this moment, instead of here. You have no right to trifle with your life." "It is my affair," I said; "my life is my own to do what I like with; and if Sir George Hay had been with me instead of Dr Brackenburn, I should have been praised for fearlessness, not blamed for folly." I knew very well that I was talking nonsense, but I didn't care. Was I—excuse him—was I engaged to Sir George Hay? he asked as quietly as could be. "I am not, nor ever shall be," I answered; "I am a free spirit!" "Free?" he repeated. "Quite delightfully free," I replied, and added flippantly to cover growing nervousness, "I care for nobody, no not I, and nobody cares for me." I don't mean to tell you or anyone else what he said then; but before Sir George Hay and the rest of the party came stumbling over

the boulders, it had been put beyond all doubt that somebody did care for me a very, very, very great deal better than I deserved. So I lost my freedom, and married Alan Brackenburn; and never was a poor woman kept in order by a husband as I by mine. That is my story, Princess Ursula.'





CHAPTER II.

‘DUNCAN GRAY.’

‘His whisper’d theme, dilated and at large,
Proves, after all, a wind-gun’s airy charge,
An extract of his diary—no more,
A tasteless journal of the day before.’



INTIMATE as these two friends were, there had been absolute silence on Ursula’s side concerning affairs of the heart. Yet Mrs Brackenburn was not without her guesses at truth; and her conviction was, that if Ursula did love any man at all, that man was not Dugald Urquhart.

‘I know you would like to set when my cousin rises,’ she said laughingly, as the time for Dugald drew near. ‘I’ve heard a child excuse itself for leaving food by saying that

the thing was "too good to eat." Is Mr Urquhart's company, then, too good to be enjoyed?'

The sound of wheels coming to a stand-still outside (the ladies had left the window now) did Ursula the good office of saving her a reply.

'He comes!' exclaimed Mrs Brackenburn, starting up. 'Here is another fine opportunity for self-denial, as one of Miss Edgeworth's good little boys somewhere says. I will hence to receive my trusty cousin with a smile, and to bid him and his servant make themselves at home,—as I wish they both were.'

She went, but the man she expected was not the man she saw. Just without the drawing-room door she was caught in Dr Brackenburn's arms; and Ursula, within, could distinctly hear the wife's glad 'Alan!' and the husband's low 'My darling!'

The moon, which had risen now, was tipping the waves with light. It cast its clearness full upon Ursula where she sat, making her pure face all the purer and the

darkness of her hair more dark. Time passed, but she did not move. Her hands were loosely clasped ; her eyes were concealed beneath their heavy fringes ; she did not know that she was no longer sole occupant of the room—that Donald Berwick, having entered the house with Dr Brackenburn, had now entered the drawing-room. The door being half-open, he had come in noiselessly, and he made no sign as yet, but stood still amid the shadows, as if reluctant to disturb Ursula's reverie.

He knew that pale, proud beauty by heart already, but that did not prevent him from reading it once more. And as he did so, he thought he could discern some change : part of the pride was gone ; Ursula of East-ravoe had certainly had a haughtier face than this. And after, when he went forward and revealed himself, could he be mistaken ?—could it be that suddenly the lily had become a rose ?—and was it fancy, or did the girl's hand really tremble as for the section of an instant it met his ?

They inquired, as was but meet, concern-

ing each other's weal; she asked him about his wanderings in Russia; he asked her how her work got on at Laighbiel. 'It was not worth mentioning such poor work as hers,' she said. The workers who got no praise and made no display, he replied, might be found some day to have been the world's real helpers after all. And then lights were brought, and Dugald Urquhart arrived.

Dugald, as you may imagine, was anything but delighted to find himself forestalled; and at the prompting of what in a lesser mind would have been called jealousy, he remarked aside to Ursula, when, after a good deal of planning and trouble, he had succeeded in making her attention all his own,—

'Our friend, Dr Brackenburn, here, is an honour to his profession. A fine physiognomy that, "sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thought," as the Bard of Avon has it. But there *are* individuals in the pulpit now-a-days who ought never to have left the plough.'

Since Donald Berwick, though a farmer's son, had never followed the plough, this satire, brilliantly epigrammatic as it was, fell somewhat wide of the mark. But Dugald himself was so much pleased with his impromptu that he mentally filed it, in order to its repetition hereafter, as occasion should serve.

That Miss Ursula Elvester could have any other feeling than a sense of flattered enjoyment at being singled out as the object of his attentions, did not, of course, present itself to his happily-constituted mind; so he no doubt believed himself to be quite a benefactor, as he told her in many words what places he had lately visited, and gave little scenic descriptions of 'heathery hillsides' and other 'delicious glimpses,' which he had honoured by resting his eyes on; mentioning nothing for its own sake, however, or its inherent loveliness, but everything only because of the all-important fact in its history, that Dugald Urquhart had chanced to look that way.

Mrs Brackenburn, well contented at having

got her husband back a week earlier than she had looked for, was also being treated to travellers' tales; but she, unlike Ursula, was really entertained with what she listened to; perhaps she was more easily pleased than the other, or it might be that Dr Brackenburn and Mr Berwick had a more telling way of putting things than nature had endowed Mr Urquhart with.

'I hope,' said Mrs Brackenburn to Mr Berwick, when her turn for speaking came, 'I fondly, fondly hope you are not now going to deliver a lecture in the Auchterbrechan Institute.'

'Never,' he assured her. 'What makes you think I could be guilty of it?'

'There is a dangerously seductive sound about such a title as a "A Race Around the Russias,"' she replied. 'And, besides, our spiritual guides have a weakness that way. Not my husband; he puts his crotchets into print; but all the rest I know anything about. Did not our U.P. neighbour tell an admiring Laighbield how he had chased the thistle-down over the breezy uplands of

Moab? Did not our brother of Braidmoss relate how he and a band of chosen vessels—'

'My dear, my dear,' interposed Dr Brackenburn.

'He did call them "chosen vessels," Alan; I am not responsible for the expression. Did he not deliver a lecture on "Our Visit to Ireland during the Great Revival?" Did not Dr Doig Sledgehammer, on coming back from pottering about the catacombs last year, thrill the Netherlaw Protestant public by an account of how somebody had offered to procure him an audience of His Holiness the Pope, and how he had flatly refused, bold man, to go near the Apocalyptic Beast? And does that popular lay-preacher, Bounding Bill, ever tire of letting his admirers know all about "the slime-pits of Siddim," where he used to dwell?'

'You have made good your case,' said Mr Berwick; 'but fortunately I am not even tempted so to offend; though I were to invite Auchterbrechan to race around the Russias, nobody would respond; all ears have been

lent to that same Bounding Bill for some time past.'

'Quite true. And would you be surprised to learn that Miss Langbiggin and I lent ours among the rest? Wasn't it good of us, Alan?'

'That is questionable,' rejoined her husband; 'it would probably have been better of you to have stayed at home.'

'I am very sure Katie must have thought so, when her pretty gold cross caught the eye of the ex-acrobat, and called forth the remark, that if a young woman esteemed the cross in her heart, she would soon leave off dangling it under her chin. I was sorry for Katie, but I can't say I disagreed with Bounding Bill: I would not myself wear the cross as an ornament.'

'And, pray, my little sensationalist, what other new thing did this wonderful preacher tell you?' asked Dr Brackenburn.

'He told us, Alan, that the world being round and the heart three-cornered, common sense might teach us that the world could never fill the heart; and a lot of other truths

equally logical and convincing. John Craig, from Scroggiehillock, was in church that evening; but *he* thought Bounding Bill did not give forth a certain sound. There was a leaning to Arminianism: too much of Free Will, and too little of the Divine Decrees. John amuses me. He is so mean, and at the same time so moral. He picked up a bargain at an old-bookstall in Netherlaw the other week. The title and the price together overcame him. The book was called "Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded," which led him to expect some treatise on holy living, but can't you fancy his disgust when he discovered, too late, that he had "wared his lily-white saxpence on a perfect novelle!" The good man is sorely exercised just now about "oor Watty:" if Watty have grace he is to be made a minister of; if not, a schoolmastership will serve. And Dr Brackenburn is to find out which it must be. It is full time you were home again, dear; many have been missing the minister, I know.'

'The minister's wife also, I hope.'

'Not so,' laughed Mrs Brackenburn. 'My

place is far more efficiently filled by Miss Elvester than by myself. You know what Miss Elvester is, Mr Berwick.'

'She is an admirable woman,' said Mr Berwick.

'She is—well, if it were not for discomposing your reverences, I would say—a brick ; as it is, I'll call her an encaustic tile, instead. Is that slang, Dr Brackenburn ?'

'Dangerously near it, I'm afraid.'

'Ah, you see, I should never have been an appendage of the church ; I *cannot* frame to say shibboleth aright.'

'Miss Elvester is a miracle of quiet energy,' said Dr Brackenburn, 'but I suspect you have been trespassing on her kindness, Matilda.'

'Of course, I have ; there was nobody else's kindness to trespass on.'

'Would not Miss Langbiggin's have done ?'

'Alan, I wonder at you ! Miss Langbiggin take classes of vulgar little boys and objectionable girls ! Why, Miss Langbiggin passes her uncle's workpeople with carefully averted flounces. She is fastidious, and the

lower orders are *not* picturesque anywhere outside of a certain rose-watery kind of religious novel, read by ladies who think ordinary fiction a sin. Which reminds me, Alan,—something came from your publishers to-day; rather important, I imagine; it lies below.’

Mrs Brackenburn had a really astonishing talent of engaging in lively conversation herself, and at the same time following the outline of any other conversation which might be going on near. She had therefore been keeping her cousin pretty well in view, as he wandered up and down heathery hill-sides, danced over bounding billows, or lay at rest on the placid bosom of some deep lagoon. (He called a loch a ‘lagoon,’ because he had the poet’s license to sacrifice literal fact to pleasing sound.)

‘He has been penning a journal with a view to printing for private circulation,’ was Mrs Brackenburn’s deduction, ‘and unfortunate Ursula is getting the cream of it beforehand. But it has gone far enough; I must relieve the victim now.’

Accordingly, while her husband went to see what his publishers had sent to him, she sauntered carelessly over to a seat beside the pair. She and her black, gauzy garments, and her rose-coloured bows, made, as was meant they should, a very effective whole; but Mr Urquhart saw nothing effective about her; he saw in her a most tormenting interruption—that was all. But he might have known better, he told himself, than to hope for anything like a prolonged sensible conversation in the same room with Matilda Brackenburn.

The disturber of the peace took a fan from the table—a black and crimson fan, to match her dress—and began flirting it about, a procedure which set Mr Urquhart completely on edge; for he loved to see a woman sitting with hands meekly folded, or in default of that, filled with some pretty foolish fancy-work. Dugald, besides feeling annoyed, looked so; only Mrs Brackenburn would not take cognisance of that. It was her purpose to introduce general conversation, so, subject being immaterial, she asked Mr Urquhart

what he had to say about Shetland, where he had lately spent five or six weeks.

'Shetland!' he echoed, as though he had a difficulty in recalling the place — 'Shetland!'

'About fifty miles to the north-east of the Orkneys, you know,' said Mrs Brackenburn helpfully.

'Shetland!' he repeated once more—then mused—then demanded what there could be to say about an island with no trees and no railways.

'Mr Berwick can tell us, perhaps,' said Mrs Brackenburn; 'we refer it to him.'

Mr Berwick replied that the want of railways was the romance of Shetland; and as for the want of trees, he had once heard it gravely argued that Shetland with trees would be as much of an anomaly as a woman with whiskers.

'Shetland is destitute of landscape,' asserted Mr Urquhart, speaking to Ursula. 'Landscape, as I take it, is impossible without trees; foliage, bosky foliage, that is the thing one wants.'

‘ *We* do not want trees,’ said Ursula ; ‘ we have grand cliffs and creeks, and lovely lochs and little hills, and the greenest grass, and the clearest water, and the brightest wild flowers, and then the magnificence of ocean all around.’

She had for the moment forgotten that Shetland was no longer her home, but as she ended, she remembered all, and sighed.

‘ How high-gravel blind is Dugald Urquhart,’ laughed Mrs Brackenburn to herself. ‘ Can he not see that he will make her abhor him if he lightlies her Shetland ? ’

‘ Granted that there were no landscape in Shetland, skyscape should be taken as amends,’ said Mr Berwick. ‘ At its best, it is by far the finest I have ever seen ; a fair summer evening’s sky is simply indescribable in ordinary prose.’

Mr Urquhart would not of course enter into any discussion with one who ought never to have left the plough, though again the feeling which might in a different man have been called jealousy made itself felt. He did not for an instant conceive the

possibility of Mr Berwick being preferred to him; not that at all: the sensation resembling jealousy was altogether concerned with the fact that Mr Berwick should presume to thrust himself under the notice of a young lady whose whole attention was already bespoken by Mr Urquhart.

'My dear Miss Ursula,' said he, 'while acknowledging that the details you mention are all very nice in their way, I at the same time humbly contend that there can be no real landscape lacking trees.'

'In fact, nature didn't know how to mix her materials when she was composing Shetland,' said Mrs Brackenburn. 'You and I would have managed much better; we would have put in plenty of trees.'

Dugald had no answer for nonsense such as this; his fort was not repartee; so he turned his eyes away from Folly, with her fan and her rose-coloured ribbons, and let them rest once more on the graceful girl at his other side, so pleasingly enrobed in neutral tints. Ursula being in half-mourning, had no choice, to be sure; but no matter, the

neutral tints were counted to her for a merit.

‘Hearing your intention of returning to Laighbiel so soon,’ he said, by way of taking up his interrupted conversation, ‘I was just about to offer my services as your escort, for I, too, am bound for Laighbeild to-morrow. My sister is at Baronshaugh, and I have some rather unpleasant business with her.’

‘How long has Miss Urquhart been at Baronshaugh?’ asked Ursula, wondering how Christian liked it, and regretting, oh so sincerely, that Mr Urquhart’s rather unpleasant business happened to call for his going to Laighbiel on the same day as herself.

‘Not quite a week,’ said Dugald; ‘but *Miss Urquhart*,’ he added reproachfully, and lowered his voice till he roared gently as a sucking-dove, ‘remember the connection; a truce to ceremony; call her by the Christian name.’

‘The connection is so very slight,’ returned Ursula distantly.

Mr Urquhart's tone was waxing too tenderly suggestive ; she really did not think she could bear it much longer. Any other man in Dugald's place would have perceived that his overtures were distasteful ; but so much in love with himself was Ursula's admirer, that not a misgiving ever visited him. The manifest constraint, the persistent avoidance of his speaking glances ; what were these but proofs that the fair one's heart was no longer in her own keeping ? Had he been alone with the young lady at this moment, he would probably have said, that, if the present connection were slight, he hoped it would soon be closer, or something to that effect ; as it was, he contented himself with the general observation, that relatives by marriage need not stand on ceremony, he thought.

Mrs Brackenburn laughed.

'I know a Laighbiel woman,' she said, 'who, when by some rare chance she has occasion to write to her husband, subscribes herself, "his truly, Mrs Gillespie." That is too much ceremony ; but the line must be

drawn somewhere, and I, like Miss Ursula Elvester, would incline to draw it before getting quite so far afield as the cousin of one's brother-in-law.'

'You have a wonderful memory, Matilda,' said Mr Urquhart, in a peculiarly dry tone; 'your repertory of anecdotes is inexhaustible.'

'I am like Varieties in a provincial newspaper,' she rejoined. 'But allow me to express the surprise which Miss Ursula Elvester feels, but is too polite to put into words. What has taken Moncrieff to Baronshaugh, of all places?'

'She has gone, I understand, at the express invitation of her cousin and mine, young Mrs Cassillis.'

'Then, begging the pardon of young Mrs Cassillis, I think she has made a mistake. Newly-married people should keep by themselves for a time, so as to get over their mutual disappointment unobserved. Yes, *disappointment*; I know perfectly well what I am saying; *he* believes he has married an angel bright and fair, and it is disappointing

to find that she is only a weak woman after all ; then as to *her*, it is impossible to tell how high aloft, at marriage, her godlike hero sate ; but happily a bride is never now burnt up, as Semele was, by the over brightness of her sun ; rather, she soon sees so many ugly spots on the face of him that she begins seriously to question if he be a sun at all. She, too, is disappointed.'

Mr Urquhart reared his head, and fixed his gaze on vacancy, as if, sharing his aunt Euphemia's opinion that Pagan myths were best left out of Christian conversation, he had sent his thoughts soaring far and away.

But when Mr Berwick observed,—'Too often he is not a sun at all, but no more than a turnip-lantern at most, such as children carry on Hallowe'en,' Dugald came out of his interesting abstraction, and begged to propose music ; for turnip-lanterns and Hallowe'en, though no doubt usual in Mr Berwick's sphere of life, were subjects totally unsuited to the drawing-room.

Mrs Brackenburn showed herself nothing

loth to discard the fan for the pianoforte. What would they please to have? Nobody expressed a preference. Left thus to choose for herself, she would take, she told them, something with a moral in it; a good and tender moral. And she took 'Duncan Gray.' She was in fine voice, as well as in high spirits, and the song lost none of its pawky drollery in the rendering. But what had come over her audience?—what? One could not wonder at the wooden expression of Mr Urquhart's correct features; no sense of humour dwelt within. But Mr Berwick was generally ready enough to join in a laugh, yet there he stood, as unsmiling as if he thoroughly endorsed Dugald's opinion, that the song was altogether unfit 'for the cheek of the young person.' And the cheek of the young person *had* suffered. Surely the colour there was other than the mere reflection of the crimson flowers on Mrs Brackenburn's fan, now raised to conceal it. Dugald, at any rate, thought so, and he was more charmed than ever with Princess Ursula. Such sweet, blushing confusion be-

tokened sensibility, and sensibility was one of the loveliest attributes of female character.

Mrs Brackenburn wheeled suddenly round.

'No applause!' she cried. 'That accompaniment demands notice of some kind. Will no one pay it a compliment, Mr Berwick?'

'It fits itself well to the words,' said Mr Berwick; 'it is what I suppose you call *humoristique*.'

'I suppose it is. My cousin Jack composed it; he can arrange an air as well as bamboozle a jury, clever boy that he is. But you don't like "Duncan Gray," Dugald? What's the matter with it?'

'Since you ask my opinion, I must confess that I look upon it as essentially vulgar,' said Mr Urquhart.

'Because it is in that pithy Scotch tongue of which we are so ashamed now-a-days?'

'A dialect is always vulgar,' responded Dugald grandiosly.

'Pardon me, no; a corruption of any language is always vulgar, if you please, but not a native dialect.'

'Ah, do you say so, indeed?' quoth Du-

gald, as if he had soared out of sight of the subject altogether.

Mrs Brackenburn faced the piano again, and sang once more, and with increased glee—

‘ Duncan fleech’d, and Duncan pray’d,
Ha, ha, the wooing o’t,
Meg was deaf as Ailsa Craig,
Ha, ha, the wooing o’t.
Duncan sigh’d baith oot and in,
Grat his een baith bleer’t and blin’,
Spak o’ loupin o’er a linn,
Ha, ha, the wooing o’t.’

And then—

‘ How it comes let doctors tell,
Ha, ha, the wooing o’t,
Meg grew sick as he grew well,
Ha, ha, the wooing o’t.
Something in her bosom wrings,
For relief a sigh she brings ;
And oh, her een, they speak sic things !
Ha, ha, the wooing o’t.’

‘ I am so glad to think that Duncan “ was a lad o’ grace,” ’ she added. ‘ I could not have forgiven him if he had repaid that poor Maggie with scorning for scorning. Could you, Mr Berwick ? ’

But Mr Berwick had not a word to say.



CHAPTER III.

THROUGH THE THORNS.

‘Quit, quit, for shame ! this will not move,
This cannot take her ;
If of herself she will not love,
Nothing can make her.’



O drive from Auchterbrechan to Laighbiel, with Mr Urquhart as a companion—an only companion ! Alarming ! not to be thought of ! So on the first opportunity of having a private word with her, Ursula appeared before Mrs Brackenburn with a heartfelt request,—

‘Your cousin has offered to save you the trouble of driving me over to Laighbiel to-morrow ; but you will very much oblige me by coming yourself, as you meant to do.’

‘What a chance of having a sweet revenge on you for your refusal to continue with me

during the rest of the time we stay here,' cried Mrs Brackenburn, clasping her hands.

'I ought not to be from home longer,' replied Ursula, quite seriously, not echoing the other's laugh. 'My being away leaves Jenny so much more to do.'

'I was only joking,' said Mrs Brackenburn; 'and I'll feel very pleased to be your charioteer myself, since you prefer my protection to Mr Urquhart's. Dugald will hate me for it though; he so evidently considers that he has an exclusive right to you.'

'*That* is a kind of joking I don't like, Matilda.'

'That is not joking, my dear; that is a fact. Anybody would see it. Mr Berwick, for instance, must be fast under the impression that you are an appropriated blessing.'

Ursula reddened.

'It is hard,' she said, 'that a man cannot be the least thing more than civil to you, without giving rise to all sorts of unpleasant speculations; only I should hope that Mr Berwick is above the silliness of misconstruing people in that way.'

‘So should not I. But forgive him, Princess Ursula, forgive him for sharing in the weaknesses of his kind.’

Ursula was deeply annoyed. It was bad enough of itself to fall a prey to Mr Urquhart’s conversational prowess; but to have it supposed that there existed any tender bond between her and a man whom the longer she knew the more she shrank from, was nothing less than intolerable; and I am afraid her rest that night was a good deal broken by her reflections thereupon. Next morning before breakfast, to refresh and brace herself, she went down to the beach. No sooner had she got there, than Dugald was seen strolling beamingly towards her. She had no excuse for returning indoors; and even if she had, no end would be served, for Mr Urquhart would of a surety return with her. So she walked slowly on, and wished herself miles away.

‘Good morning,’ said Mr Urquhart, melodiously.

“‘One *autumn morn*, with pensive thought,
I wandered o’er the sea-beat shore.”

You love the sea, Miss Ursula?’

‘Yes.’ Ursula, if she loved anything, loved the sea.

‘Ay! quite natural; quite natural. But trees, now, and flowers, Miss Ursula—these softer objects of delight—you have a place for them also in your heart, have you not?’

‘Woods make me melancholy,’ said Ursula; ‘and a luxuriance of flowers only stifles and oppresses me with its sweetness.’

‘Ah! Miss Ursula, Miss Ursula, what a strange young lady you are. But, do you know, you remind me of a flower yourself—no, do not turn away—of a tall, fair lily, queen of the garden.’

Things were becoming serious.

‘I think we had better go in to breakfast now,’ said Ursula hastily.

‘Breakfast!’ echoed Dugald. ‘Faugh! Let those who like go in from this glorious morning to breakfast; exchange these delicious draughts of sea-air for reeking coffee and indigestible hot rolls. *I* do not think of breakfast at such an hour as this.’

‘But *I* do,’ said Ursula; ‘so excuse me, Mr Urquhart; I am going in.’

‘Why, it is not ten minutes since you quitted the house,’ represented Dugald, with an insinuating smile.

‘I don’t see that that matters, if I choose now to go in again,’ replied Princess Ursula, preparing to stand on her dignity.

But pride goes before a fall. Punishment was on its way to her. The breakers on this Auchterbrechan shore came up with the speed of race-horses at full gallop, a fact which Ursula was paying no attention to. So, while her companion went on to tell her, in the bated-breath fashion which was so much more unbearable than the every-day organ tones,—

‘If you go, then must I ; for with you the whole brightness of the morning would vanish. I have learnt lately, fair queen of lilies (let me name you so!) that I was not formed for solitude ;’ and, while she was raising her head in the haughty way less practised by her of late than in days past, her feet were caught by an advancing wave. Startled, she took a few bewildered steps forward—false steps, as

it proved, for they brought her into the middle of one of the quicksands with which the shore abounded. A second wave followed, throwing her on her knees, and in its ebb sucking her down the slope ; and, as if she had not been sufficiently humbled even yet, instantly rolled up a third foamy monster, dashed over her in full force, and laid her level with the crabs and the jelly-fish. Dugald had retreated from the breakers which overwhelmed Ursula ; but now, that detachment of billows having spent itself, he rushed gallantly back, raised the drenched, blinded, panting girl in his arms, and ejaculating,—

‘ Fear nothing ! *I* have saved you ! You are safe with me ! ’ bore her over the sands.

As soon as she got back her breath, Ursula ungratefully tried to disengage herself. But the attempt was futile ; Dugald had, and would hold. He misconstrued her desire for freedom, too ; it was only another pleasing manifestation of the sensibility which he so much admired.

‘Never mind,’ he said, clasping her tighter. ‘Let the impudent fellow stare.’ (Mr Berwick, out for his morning walk, was crossing the links.) ‘Contemptible that he is! But we will take no notice of him; we shall have reached the house ere he comes so far.’

Here was the finishing touch: Donald Berwick to see her in the arms of Dugald Urquhart! Small blame to him if he should believe her to be an appropriated blessing now. As Standalane was scarcely two minutes’ walk from the shore, the pair did reach the house before Mr Berwick came so far. In the small, square lobby Ursula, cold in body and crushed in spirit, was set at liberty, and the tale of peril told by Dugald to the Brackenburns. Eager as she had been about breakfast a short while since, slight indeed was the breakfast Ursula took that day. Ungrateful still, she believed that Mr Urquhart’s help had come later than it might; nor had she a doubt but that, had it been only a degree later still, she could have extricated herself without it at all. Dugald, the hero of the hour, was of a differ-

ent opinion ; and while he made it practically plain that his despising of coffee and rolls was confined to theory, he insisted on glorying over Ursula as a trophy snatched by him from a watery grave, and by a thousand reminders kept it constantly in view that Miss Elvester had him—and Providence, but Dugald before Providence—to thank, that the fairest of her girls was not now sunk low under the whelming tide. His manner to the young lady became more and more affectionate, and his glances increasingly suggestive ; also, he oftener than once during the forenoon addressed her as his queen of lilies. He only waited an opportunity to make her a formal offer of marriage, and that he should have during the drive to Laighbiel. Yes ; then she should know the honour in store for her, then, with none but the birds in the hedgerows to witness, he would tenderly pour forth his tale, and listen in reply to the sweet confession of Ursula's love. He naturally felt himself aggrieved, therefore, when Mrs Brackenburn tricked him out of being Ursula's escort. His thoughts of that lady were neither

gentle nor cousinly when he saw the ponyphaeton depart. He nevertheless made a shift to conceal his resentment under forced smiles (nothing but smiles must be seen by Ursula to-day), and followed on horseback to Baronshaugh.

Ursula from Auchterbrechan, and Ulrica from Hilyascord, where she had been sunning herself all summer, returned on the same evening to The Brae; and Ulrica would have had Ursula set out with her at once to Baronshaugh.

‘Christian will think us such unkind creatures else,’ she urged, when Ursula refused. ‘And then I do so want to see the library. Jenny praises it; and you know *she* isn’t easily pleased. I know Christian means to improve herself by studying every day, and I am sure she will lend you as much informing literature as you care for; and I might get something entertaining. Will you not come?’

‘Not now,’ said obdurate Ursula; ‘the Urquharts are at Baronshaugh.’

‘Well, isn’t Mr Urquhart quite a nice person?’

‘Very likely, but I don’t wish to meet him to-night.’

‘I believe you find Mr Berwick more lovable than Mr Urquhart after all,’ said this terrible Ulrica. ‘Don’t you think she does, Jenny?’

Miss Elvester, come to a critical part in her work, perhaps did not hear the question; at all events she did not answer it.

‘One does not consider gentlemen lovable, Ulrica,’ said Ursula in her loftiest manner, ‘only likeable, at most.’

‘How when one marries?’ inquired Ulrica.

‘You have nothing to do with marriage. Have you been practising at all at Hilyascord? Do you remember the relative minor of—’

‘Not yet, not yet,’ interposed Ulrica, and her hands went up as a shield. ‘It is too soon to talk of minor scales. Let us discuss things of general interest, Ursula. Do you know Mr Berwick is to preach in our church on Sunday? Isn’t that delightful? Isn’t it?’

‘I am glad you think so,’ replied Ursula sersnely. ‘But if you can’t answer for your

music, can you for your history? How much are you able to tell me about the Gowrie Conspiracy, for example?’

‘I shouldn’t like to be you,’ cried Ulrica, in a highly injured tone. ‘You have just such a heart as that miserable Mary of England had, except that “Education” is written on yours instead of “Calais;” saying which she beat her retreat, accompanied by her satellite Slyboots, now grown out of kittenish folly into sleek and sober cathood.

‘Miss Elvester, busy making up tulle and lace into a piece of adornment to be worn by Mysie at some Laighbiel wedding, having now passed the critical part, stopped her needle to remark, in a casual sort of way,—

‘Talking of Mr Berwick, he *is* really to be married soon. Laighbiel is so famous for announcing coming marriages which never come, that I must confess I was sceptical about that engagement. At a meeting of the Clothing Society the other day, however, I was privileged to be by while Mrs M’Spur gave Miss Langbiggin a melancholy summary of the duties required

of a minister's wife. Afterwards somebody wanted to know when the marriage might take place; and Miss Langbiggin replied, that she is only waiting till some alteration is completed about the manse. Didn't you hear anything of the matter at Auchterbrechan?'

It may be that Ursula too had been somewhat sceptical about Donald Berwick's engagement to Miss Langbiggin; it may be that the confirmation of the rumour come upon her with a slight shock; and this perhaps accounted for the long silence which there was before she answered, saying,—

'Nothing. We knew nobody there, and heard no gossip of any kind.'

'Well, I suppose we congratulate Mr Berwick heartily; we feel, don't we, that he could not do better than marry? He has our best wishes for his happiness?'

'Oh, if Mr Berwick cares for our congratulations, he has mine,' said Ursula; 'and if my wishes for his happiness could do him any good, he should have these too.'

But though she kept her countenance

bravely, it cost her an effort to say so much ; and as soon as her sister had resumed work, she rose and with slow and stately steps went out to the garden. That was her usual resort when she felt the little house too strait for her. Indeed, the path half-way up, crossing from right to left, was known by the family as Ursula's-walk, so many an hour had she paced back and forward over it, reading, or thinking, or sentimentally day-dreaming, as might be. She did not turn aside here now, but kept right on,—past the bower,—through the plantation,—and only halted when the thorn boundary at the top was reached.

There had been a flying shower ; but the sky was clear again, though here below every leaf glistened still with wet. The poplars, amidst which Ursula stood were all a-tremble ; the hedge twinkled with a thousand rain-drops, mirrors for the moonlight. On the hedge's other side a corn-field lay ripening, its broad bosom stirred by just the faintest ripple now and then ; while over against it, above the belt of trees that bounded it,

hung the full moon in a background of crystalline, that melted, as it neared her, into opal. One strong star shone beside her; the rest had not yet looked out, or, having ventured forth, had³ withdrawn again, quenched in her greater glory. Away down in the valley glimmered the lit windows of Laighbield. But not a murmur was audible from the village. The only sound heard here was the rustle of the poplars; and that greeted the ear like a soft, continuous hush.

Suddenly the spell was broken by a footstep—footsteps. Then a voice—*the* voice, Dugald Urquhart's voice—reverberated along the silence, calling Ursula from her contemplation of heaven's calm mystery. Next thrilled through the distance with silvery clearness,—

‘Ursula, Ursula, Ursula!’ telling that Ulrica was acting as Mr Urquhart's guide.

Ursula did not answer. Hidden among the trees, she was making her way along by the hedge to a spot where she knew a breach had recently been broken by a band of gooseberry-stealing boys. But on reaching the

place she was disappointed; the gap had been effectually stopped with dead branches. What then? Must she surrender herself? Emphatically no. She could not bear Mr Urquhart near her to-night. The remembrance of his arms about her in the morning still made her shudder. The idea of any further gallantries was not to be endured. So she stooped, and with eager haste, oddly enough at variance with the repose which usually marked her, began to pull away the obstructing branches. Alack, how stubborn they were! Had they leagued themselves against her, that they refused to be moved? Nearer drew the footsteps.

‘Ursula, where are you?’ cried the silver-voiced.

‘Where are you, Miss Ursula?’ boomed the organ-toned.

And these branches would not, *would* not yield. Oh, for the power of a— But yes; at last! With a strength which seemed born of her extreme need, Ursula did finally manage to tear out part of the obstacle. A portion still remained, however, and let her tug and

strain as she would, continued to defy her. Her seekers were by this time at the bower ; in another moment they would be in the plantation, and then— She might have given herself up at the beginning, but could she now ? The opening she had effected looked impossibly small, yet the choice lay between that on the one hand and discovery on the other ; ignominious discovery, too, inasmuch as, while flying from Mr Urquhart, she was altogether ashamed of the manner of her flight. Her choice of the two evils was, then, to face the thorns. Down on the soaking ground she knelt. By the assistance of tufts of spear-grass which cut her fingers, and bunches of nettles which stung them, she contrived to creep into the hole in the thicket, and once there, by sheer strength of will succeeded in forcing herself through. The shawl she had been muffled in was left in the passage. Face, neck, hands were most cruelly scratched with thorns. But what of that !—Ursula was safe.

Dugald Urquhart would have neither sight nor speech of her this night.



CHAPTER IV.

ARTISTIC.

‘Through all the town his art they praised ;
His custom grew, his price was raised.’



MR FYFE ARMSTRONG was on his way to be a man of mark in Netherlaw. He had painted ‘The Forsaken Ariadne.’ A nobleman had bought the picture ; and for that cogent reason all the artist’s fashionable towns-folk crowded to his studio to admire. Among the rest came good Mrs Smillie ; and she had never seen a handsomer frame — never ! But—well, it wasn’t just every wall that it would suit ; and she would like it better if he would brighten it up a bit—bring out the sun in the far corner, like.

Mr and Mrs Baillie Geddes were among

the number likewise, and with them was their son-in-law elect, Sir Leveret Landless, Baronet, a bored-looking young man, with an eye-glass, an aristocratic stare, and a really distinguished drawl. Mrs Baillie Geddes, after gazing stonily at the Ariadne for some time, observed to Sir Leveret that while, mark you, it was not for her to say that there was no talent in the thing, she would and did aver that, so far as she personally was concerned, she had more real satisfaction, *much* more real satisfaction, in a contemplation of Julliet Amelia Mary's study of 'Strawberries and Cream.' To which Julliet Amelia Mary's affianced, as in duty bound, replied that 'Strawberries and Cream' was indeed '*perfection!*' Mr Baillie Geddes having wondered 'who the mischief' the Ariadne was, and been informed by his lady that 'she was a young person who once gave some besiegers a clue,' had gone round the studio under the artist's guidance, casting a cursory glance here and there, but venting no criticism till he returned to his consort, when he jogged her elbow, and whispered her to

‘come on out of this, Marget, for I am sick weariet of the haill hypothee.’

As Mr Fyfe Armstrong attended these personages to the door, entered young Mrs Cassillis of Baronshaugh ; but as she had undergone a Cinderella change since the day when she had been browbeaten by Mrs Baillie Geddes in Lockerbie Street, and treated with such scant ceremony by Mr Baillie Geddes in Alexander Buildings, neither of the pair was conscious of ever having seen this pretty, graceful creature before, till Mr Fyfe Armstrong’s words of greeting revealed the identity. Upon that Mrs Baillie Geddes took a step backward, to claim knowledge of a young lady whom, as fortune’s wheel had gone, it was decidedly the thing to know.

‘Mrs Cassillis and myself have met ere now,’ she said, bowing with impressment. ‘Will Mrs Cassillis permit Mr and Mrs Baillie Geddes to renew the pleasure of her acquaintance?’

Christian returned the bow, but not with impressment.

‘The meeting Mrs Baillie Geddes refers

to is, pardon me, an incident in my life which it pleases me best not to think of,' she replied, and with the stateliest of courtesies, left Mrs Baillie Geddes for the Ariadne.

There were hours in Christian's own experience of which the picture was a transcript, and this young wife felt glad that, with nobody by, she could look at that lovely despairing woman, standing solitary in the mocking sunshine, unloved and desolate.

But Mr Fyfe Armstrong, who, by the way, had enjoyed the episode at the studio door—it was refreshing to see Mrs Baillie Geddes, the magnificent, so neatly snubbed—was before long beside her. And he was flattered then; for the expression he saw in those deep sea-blue eyes told him that his picture had been understood.

'I can't praise it,' Christian said; 'I can only say, thank you.'

'I thank *you*,' he rejoined. 'You are the first young lady who has cared for the poor thing.'

'Am I, indeed! What is it that they care for?'

‘ Their own portraits first, and next to these the “ From Him,” and “ After the Ball,” that one is so fatally sure of in every Netherlaw art collection. You know what I mean, Mrs Cassillis ? ’

‘ I guess at it : a happy girl, likely in a garden alley, smiling upon a love letter ; a lay figure, face and costume copied from *La Follet*, nicely arranged in a becoming attitude, thinking over the past evening’s conquests.’

‘ Well,’ said the artist, laughing, ‘ you can perhaps fancy how a man of ambition like myself must feel when he sees his achievements sent aloft, while conventionalities of that sort get hung on the line.’

‘ Do not places go by merit ? ’

‘ We try to think so ; but when a man finds himself skied or shoved into a dark corner to make room for the prettinesses of lady amateurs, his faith in the force of merit is apt to fail.’

‘ Was it the fear of lady amateurs that kept Mr Fyfe Armstrong from exhibiting anything last spring ? ’

‘Well, no ; I sold the picture I had been working at to Langbiggin of Laighbiel, before the Exhibition opened.’

‘I should like to see that picture ; Mr Langbiggin’s choice.’

‘It was something meant for a representation of Jocund Day standing tiptoe on the misty mountain tops—but I’ve got an idea of it somewhere ; if you care to look at it, excuse me, and I will hunt it up.’

Glen having had business in town, and having appointed to meet his wife at Mr Fyfe Armstrong’s, came in while the artist was still on the search for that ‘idea.’ And with Glen came Moncrieff.

“ ‘We met—’twas in a crowd,”’ explained the former ; ‘and Moncrieff, who is to dine at my mother’s, thought she would take the Ariadne by the way.’

Believing, as she did, that Glen had been his cousin’s lover not so long ago, Christian had a somewhat peculiar feeling towards Moncrieff. But she shook hands with what frankness she could, and then, while Glen made an examination of what he had come to

see, fell as naturally as possible into her old position of listener. Moncrieff was soon in the heart of a monologue; a patchwork of trifles not as light as air, but a great deal lighter. After she had fully published and illustrated herself, she actually evinced some faint twilight of interest in Christian—the fact is noteworthy from its novelty: she said,—

‘What a darling of a bonnet you have got! You used always to wear such mean little hats; didn’t you, Miss Elvester?’

Glen, who had just done with his inspection, threw in the reminder, which Christian herself would not have taken the trouble to do, that there was no Miss Elvester here.

‘Neither there is, of course,’ acquiesced Moncrieff; ‘but it would seem so odd to call her “Christian”; if it had been “Christina,”—but “Christian!”’

‘There’s no need for “Christian” either, if you object to it.’

‘Oh, isn’t there? Then I will call her “Christina.”’

Glen took her by the shoulders, and made her confront the Ariadne, saying,—

‘Now then, study that.’

As for studying, Moncrieff had no notion of it.

‘Oh, oh, oh!’ she exclaimed, ‘what a waist! twenty-eight inches, I do believe! And if dresses like that were worn when she was in life, I am glad not to have been born then.’

‘I don’t see it,’ said Glen; ‘I rather fancy you would look well, dressed classically.’

‘Do you think I should? Well, I don’t mind trying. If you will get up a lot of *tableaux vivants*, I’ll dress so and pose in that way. Will you have *tableaux*, Glen?’

‘Here and now?’ inquired Glen.

‘How absurd! How could it be here? At Baronshaugh, of course. I’m sure every one expects it of you.’

Glen did not burn with desire to have Moncrieff at Baronshaugh; he could not sufficiently forgive her the mischief she had wrought, to want her as a guest, so long at least as the effect of that mischief remained. Accordingly he said,—

‘Have us excused to everybody ; we are not up to the *tableaux vivants* mark just yet.’ Then he turned to his wife with the information,—‘There is a picture I do mean to have though. I’m going to put you into Fyfe Armstrong’s hands, Christian.’

‘To have my portrait painted ? Thanks ; but I don’t think it is necessary—of what use are duplicates ?—you have myself.’

‘Have I ?’

‘And besides, I’m sure Mr Fyfe Armstrong objects to portrait-painting.’

‘I wouldn’t have him paint me,’ cried Moncrieff ; ‘no, not for suns and worlds. He will paint your nose quite off the straight, Christina, just as he painted Dugald’s. Dugald’s *is* rather aslant of course ; he says everybody’s is, if you only come to examine them. But I know mine isn’t at all. And Dugald declares he has been swindled out of his money, and that it was roguery to charge so much for such a discreditable daub. He tells everybody about it, you know, and what a cheat and a charlatan Mr Fyfe Armstrong is. He says his reputation will be made to suffer

for his being such a humbug ; and so it will, of course.'

Glen had been doing his best to arrest his cousin's flow of second-hand animadversion. But she would not understand his signs, and continued to the end, all unwitting that Mr Fyfe Armstrong had lifted the curtain which separated ante-room from studio, and was standing close behind. When she did become aware of this fact, she clung to Glen's arm for support, and murmured low,—

'Take me out! take me out! for I am going to faint.'

But as soon as Mr Fyfe Armstrong withdrew to fetch water to stay her, she at once raised her head to say reassuringly,—

'I am not faint in reality, you know ; only one had to do something, hadn't one ?'

'Really, Moncrieff!' ejaculated Glen, in a tone which expressed something quite other than admiration of the young lady's ingenuity. And he lost no time in transferring his fair, confiding burden to the nearest ottoman.

With half-shut eyes Moncrieff languished

there, and drank the water which was brought. It was only gradually, very gradually, that she revived, though Mr Fyfe Armstrong acted as if he had overheard nothing, and when she could bear to look at it, showed her the *Jocund Day*, just as if her brother had not called him a cheat, a charlatan, and a humbug. The lovely critic gave it as her notion that the sketch submitted to her would be a charming landscape if it hadn't been so dark that one couldn't make it out, and immediately afterwards conveyed privately to Glen her impression that it was so crazy—wasn't it?—to speak as if days ever could have tiptoes.

When the party of three took leave of him, Mr Fyfe Armstrong, with exemplary politeness, trusted that Miss Urquhart felt herself perfectly recovered. Miss Urquhart assured him that she did, quite perfectly; and to remove any remaining suspicions from the artist's mind, added,—

'It was all owing to the smell of paint, you know,' for though she herself had made some futile efforts at painting in her boarding-school days, she did not now pause to discri-

minate between house-decorating and nature-copying. Once in the carriage, and on her way to Argyll Gardens, Moncrieff was glorious.

‘Wasn’t it a splendid piece of fun?’ she said self-approvingly.

‘Splendid,’ returned Glen, dryly; ‘but Christian didn’t seem to appreciate the humour of it somehow.’

‘Who didn’t? Oh, cousin Glen, how wickedly you frowned while I was telling you about Dugald’s portrait; quite as if you had the evil eye. I thought you must be in pain through tight boots. It was altogether so absurdly ridiculous. And how anxious he was to go to Baronshaugh to paint Christina. I daresay he believes I am staying with you.’

‘That certainly would account satisfactorily for his anxiety, especially after what he had overheard. But I can’t say myself that I noticed the anxiety.’

‘Cross old thing! Have you been noticing, then’ (very coaxingly this), ‘how shockingly low spirited I am? I have been ages alone at Craigie Urquhart.’

‘Four weeks, isn’t it, my poor cousin?’

‘Four centuries, indeed ! Where ought I to go for change of air, cousin Glen ?’

‘Ask your medical adviser, cousin Moncrieff ; for how should I know ?’

Christian’s mind was made up ; Christian said,—

‘Won’t you come to Baronshaugh ? We are rather quiet there ; but I’ll do what I can to amuse you.’

‘I shall be glad to come,’ rejoined Moncrieff, most readily. ‘I can come at once ; unless’ (in a pretty pettish tone of appeal) ‘my cousin will not have me. What, cousin Glen ?’

‘Christian’s pleasure is mine,’ was the reply ; not the reply Moncrieff wanted, though ; and she took revenge by asking Glen, if he were conscious that he quite ludicrously resembled Aunt Euphemia when he smiled.

So it happened that Moncrieff got herself invited to Baronshaugh. Christian did not hope to shine her down—that would be simply out of the question ; all Christian meant was, that Glen should have no occasion to call his wife jealous.



CHAPTER V.

A DIFFERENCE ABOUT A KISS.

One kiss from thee,
Will counsel be,
And physic.

HITHERTO Glen had been greatly occupied with the affairs of his estate,—too busy with lawyers and deeds and settlements, it almost seemed, to act the lover even if he would; and if he were not perfectly contented with the friendly relations established between his wife and him, he kept it to himself. Christian had had Willie Ruthven with her all this time, and would have retained him still, but that her mother-in-law had refused to lend him longer to a young woman who had a husband

to engross her ; so he had been reluctantly returned on the day of the visit to Mr Fyfe Armstrong's studio. Having seen nothing to indicate in any way how the peculiar position she had taken up had affected Glen towards her—whether he cared a little more for her than at marriage, or cared even less, Christian feared the coming of Moncrieff. Yet, even on second thoughts, she considered that it had been wisely done to ask her to Baronshaugh. Such a one as Moncrieff would be certain to pay a visit sooner or later, whether invited or not ; and surely, reasoned Christian, it was more dignified thus to take the matter into one's own hands, and of one's own free will invite her. Reasoned so, nevertheless secretly worried herself to a pitiful degree, thinking how she should behave in the trying circumstances before her. In this she disquieted herself in vain, for when the time of anticipated trouble came, there was no need for the exercise of one of all the exceptional virtues which she had been invoking to her service. Either Glen was a consummate dissembler (and that his wife

would not believe, even though he had deceived her), or his sentiments towards Moncrieff were of a cast entirely cool and cousinly. Of course, she, still lost in a maze of misunderstanding as she was, continued to imagine that Glen *had* loved Moncrieff; but Moncrieff after her nature had requited him, and this, so Christian fancied, was the outcome, this easy indifference alike to the presence and the absence of the once beloved.

It was not hard, then, to perform with a good grace all that the position of a hostess required; not even though the guest was full of whims, and follies, and contrivances for putting everybody about her to a maximum of trouble for a minimum of result; not though she walked, talked, rode with her cousin, under the seeming impression that she was still his sole earthly object of delight; not though she treated one to the whipt-cream of her conversation, as if to listen to that were the single reason for one's having been sent into the universe at all.

Such was the posture of affairs when, one

August morning, about two months after his marriage, Glen came into the breakfast-room while his wife was saying an affectionate good-bye to her eldest sister, who had been making an early call.

‘There, that will suffice!’ Miss Elvester protested. ‘I am willing to believe that you’re very fond of me, without all this nonsense in testimony of it.’

‘I must be allowed the nonsense,’ said Christian; ‘yes, I must and [will, Jenny’ (and the nonsense was repeated). ‘Now I am vain of myself, for I feel morally certain that there isn’t one other creature in the round world who dares kiss Miss Elvester against her inclination.’

Glen walked up now, but Christian did not know that she had been previously observed till, Miss Elvester having left, it was said,—

‘So you keep all your kisses for your sisters?’

‘Yes,’ she answered coolly—‘for my sisters.’

‘One slightly envies them, which is, I suppose, a sin,’ said he.

Cool as she looked, Christian felt somewhat uncomfortable. Oh, for Willie Ruthven again!

‘Jenny expects to have both Ursula and Ulrica with her this evening,’ she observed, by way of diversion.

‘As a special boon,’ rejoined Glen, ‘might I request that when these favoured young ladies come to see you, you get the tender part over in private?’

To this she did not reply. She had opened the door of a fernery which filled the space between two of the windows, and was touching the leaves in that tantalisingly caressing way she had. Glen watched her for some time, then drew near, to be shown how this beauty had flourished, and that delicate foreign thing was going to thrive after all. As they stood so, both stooping over the plants, it seemed a by no means unnatural proceeding on Glen’s part to let his arm wander round the pretty supple figure so alluringly near him. By no means unnatural, yet by no means to be permitted in spite of that. A flame kindled in Christian’s eyes;

she instantly got rid of the encirclement, and drawing herself very straight, she said,—

‘I beg your pardon, but you forget yourself.’

No man would have liked the rebuff, and Glen’s face crimsoned.

‘It is you who forget yourself, I think,’ he retorted. ‘I had hoped that by this time—’

He stopped, for through a window which stood open to the lawn sauntered Moncrieff. An all-is-vanity expression rested on those beautiful features under that gipsy sun-hat; the bright garden-terraces which her cousin’s wife so greatly affected were too tiresome; the park with its trees and its river, her cousin’s pride, was too one-could-not-tell-what; life at Baronshaugh was not stimulating enough.

‘This story that you gave me is quite too stupid, Christina,’ she complained, as with weary air she laid a volume down. ‘I can’t read such dull stuff.’

Christian murmured something about being sorry that she was unable to meet Moncrieff’s taste in literature. Glen’s eyes were spark-

ling angrily, but Glen was just, and would not visit his wife's sins upon his cousin ; so he took the trouble of civilly inquiring what the name of the rejected book was.

‘ “ ‘The Mill on the Floss,’ ” replied Moncrieff, when she had refreshed her memory by reference to the title-page. ‘ So childish ! I wish people wouldn't write such silly novels.’

‘ Say, why don't you write a novel yourself, if only to show the public how it might be done ? ’ inquired Glen.

‘ I wouldn't be a blue-stocking for anything,’ she answered, taking the suggestion seriously. ‘ I wouldn't have my fingers stained with ink. And, besides, you might get into a trick of putting a pen behind your ear and walking about so.’

‘ Ah, that would be sad, certainly ; but you know there are authors who—’

‘ *Please*, cousin Glen, don't talk about authors ; books and writers *are* the driest subjects, aren't they ?—so come now and play croquet. Come, Christina ; you know I must practise regularly for next season's Tournament.’

Christian knew it only too well ; Moncrieff had made her obliging hostess very heartily tired of croquet.

‘ I am not wanted,’ said Glen, as his cousin passed her hand within his arm, that so he might bear as much of her weight as she could dispose of ; ‘ Christian, who dotes on croquet, will play with you. I should be a superfluity.’

‘ Yes, but you *are* wanted,’ cried Moncrieff. ‘ It is tame and prosy when Christina and I play by ourselves. Do come, cousin Glen.’

‘ Well, I suppose it is all in the day’s work,’ reflected Glen ; and he went to the croquet-lawn.

‘ You shall be my partner, of course,’ said Moncrieff ; ‘ we shall have one ball each, and Christina can have two, and play with dummy, as it were.’

‘ Why not fight every man for his own hand, like Hal o’ the Wynd ?’ demanded Glen.

‘ Hoyle is for cards, not for croquet, cousin Glen ; and I play best when I have a partner.’

It was arranged as she wished. But if she

played best with a partner, without a partner she must have played deplorably indeed. She blamed her luck, and blamed her mallet, and blamed her cousin ; and when all would not do, once and again surreptitiously insinuated her ball where it had no claim whatever to be.

‘That won’t pass at the Tournament,’ said Glen, surprising her on such an occasion. ‘Take back your ball, if you please, Moncrieff.’

She took back her ball ; but at the same time expressed unlimited astonishment at Glen for turning against his own partner, and then defended her conduct by accusing Christian of having cheated all through.

‘She is incapable of it,’ said Christian’s husband.

‘I’m sure she isn’t, or she wouldn’t have been a rover already,’ returned Moncrieff, with fine logic ; ‘should you, Christina ?’

‘Yes ; for I had made up my mind to win,’ said Christian, who was having things entirely her own way, and enjoying it. Her husband got no mercy from her ; and to make Glen’s already bad case the worse, he would not

revenge himself when he could. But having been defeated in three consecutive games, he said,—

‘Hold, hold ; it is enough !’ for he did not like to see his wife set herself so decidedly against him, even in play.

‘Very good,’ replied the victrix ; ‘if you would rather not be beaten any more, I don’t insist ;’ and she shouldered her mallet, and, triumphantly smiling, walked away.

The discomfited partners followed, Moncrieff hanging on Glen’s arm and wondering what poor, dear Quentin would think if he could see them two playing croquet at Baronshaugh, and losing every time.

‘You said you were sorry when poor, dear cousin Quentin was killed,’ she continued, Glen being unable to penetrate the veil ; ‘but you weren’t really, of course.’

‘But I was,’ replied Glen emphatically ; ‘very sincerely sorry.’

‘Dugald doesn’t believe it ; Dugald declares you were obliged to pretend, but that all the while you were crowing with glad-

ness. Oh, you needn't toss your head so ill-temperedly, cousin Glen; it wasn't I who said so, it was Dugald. But look, Glen, look! yonder *is* Dugald riding on some frightful old hired hack. What brings him here?'

'Brotherly solicitude,' said Glen.

It soon transpired, however, that brotherly solicitude had nothing to do in the matter, but brotherly indignation rather. Unpleasantness had arisen from what Moncrieff had said in the hearing of Mr Fyfe Armstrong the other day. Dugald took many words to tell his tale in, but it can be stated in very few:—The lawyer of 'that artist fellow' had been in communication with Mr Urquhart, and Dugald now would fain learn from Moncrieff's own lips what had taken place in the studio. But Moncrieff was the most unsatisfactory person in creation to question or to scold; she would not explain; anger made no impression on her; when it was demanded reverberatingly, what she had to say for herself, what she had to say was, that she quite hoped Dugald *would* be put in the newspapers, and *would* have to pay heavy damages,

as he called them ; that was what he deserved, for making himself so odiously disagreeable to her.

On the first sound of strife, Glen thought proper to withdraw. At the top of the grand-staircase he met Christian and told her who was below.

‘ I heard the rumour of him,’ she replied, ‘ and am now on my way to see.’

‘ Tarry awhile,’ counselled Glen, holding open the door of the music-room invitingly. ‘ Moncrieff is in a bad way. Dugald, threatened by Fyfe Armstrong with an action, is thundering at her in the library.’

‘ Alas for Moncrieff ! Why didn’t you stay to protect her ?’

‘ I was afraid.’

‘ How brave of you, Captain Cassillis !’

‘ To tell the truth, I wished to have some talk with you ; I was on my way to look for you at this moment. Come in here, Christian.’

She slightly hesitated, then did as he bade her, and passed before him into the music-room. But instead of asking him what he desired of her, she sat down at once to pro-

ceed with the copying of some music which she had commenced on the previous day.

‘Is it absolutely necessary that you should always be busy about something when I am with you?’ inquired Glen.

‘Not absolutely necessary; only, why shouldn’t I be busy, please?’

‘Because it is scarcely civil to me.’

‘Oh, I beg your pardon! But I sinned in ignorance; I did not know that civility includes idleness.’

‘Once in a way it does, I believe,’ rejoined Glen.

He was standing by the window, and the window overlooked the croquet-lawn, so that there spread out before him the scene of his recent defeat. He looked at it, and then at Christian, obediently idle now, and he said,—

‘Doesn’t it happen to strike you that you ought to make me some reparation for all your sauciness down yonder?’

‘What do you mean?’ she asked.

‘I think you know very well what I mean. It is that I hope and expect you will let me

have the kiss I have been waiting so long a time for,—*so* long a time, Christian.'

She shook her head.

'Anything you really want I shall be glad to do for you,' she said; 'but this I will not.'

'I really want this,' he insisted. 'There is nothing else just now I want so much.'

Christian smiled sceptically, and answered, with a sort of mocking sweetness which was trying in the extreme,—

'You do not want it so much but that you will go on living ever so comfortably without it.'

'You must excuse me, Christian, if I say that this whim of yours is the sheerest piece of absurdity. You are acting in a way (I am forced to speak plainly to you) which I could not have imagined possible to any sensible woman.'

'What! because I will not have you amuse yourself with me when you have nothing better to do? I do not think so. And, don't you remember, we came to an understanding about this before?'

'It is quite time there should be another

understanding. You can't say I have not had patience. The wonder is, not that I should persist in getting a kiss from those undutiful lips now, but that I should have left them unknissed so long.'

Had Christian been persuaded that her husband loved her, he should have had the kiss, and welcome; but this was not love, she felt sure, but merely a desire to obtain what was withheld from him, just because it was so withheld. Thus judging, she replied,—

'I prefer to keep to the old one, Glen. It has suited me very well so far, and you too, whatever you may say.'

Again, as before, the discussion was interrupted; and again, as before, by Moncrieff. Dugald was making himself so very fearfully unpleasant, and cousin Glen must take a poor persecuted girl's part against a disagreeable brother, who was raving like a lion, only more insanelly.

'Am I a lion-tamer, that you come to me?' said Glen,—moving towards the door, however.

In passing Christian, he stooped, to whisper,—

‘We shall settle that question later.’

‘It is settled now,’ she replied.

Glen had at all times a determined visage, and its characteristic attribute was peculiarly noticeable now.

‘No, by your leave, it is not settled,’ he said, as he turned to follow Moncrieff; ‘I refuse to consider it so.’

‘He is growing angry, because he can’t get his way,’ thought Christian. ‘Well, let him! He must be more than angry before he shall have a kiss from me.’





CHAPTER VI.

GLEN'S VOW.

‘ Husband, husband, cease your strife,
Nor longer idly rave, sir ;
Though I am your wedded wife,
Yet I am not your slave, sir !’



HERE are a few lucky and happily-constituted individuals here and there, whom everybody praises in the gate. Neither specially witty it may be, nor very wise, but just good-naturedly willing to live and let live, and ready always to make the best and most of things and people, in whatever circumstances placed.

Such were the Cochranes of Dreichwinnock, nearest county neighbours to Baronshaugh. There was a large family, and the three

eldest, Grizzel, Robbie, and Rory (they gloried in the Scotch form of their respective names) were well known to the Cassillis connection; indeed the mother of the late laird had many a time striven to impress it upon Glen that a more suitable partner he would never find than Miss Grizzel Cochrane. But though Glen had not questioned the admirable qualities of Miss Cochrane, he had apparently shared Mrs Brackenburn's objection to so much of a good thing; at any rate, on the young lady's sunshiny imperturbability being again and again urged upon him, he had replied, that he would rather have an occasional breeze than a perpetual calm, and had gone and married his mother's governess. It was privately believed by her sisters, and her cousins, and her aunts, that Grizzel would not have said no to Captain Cassillis if he had sought her for his bride, but even if it were so, she did not bear the least grudge against Glen because he had not sought her, nor cherish the slightest pique towards Christian, whom he had sought instead.

To-day she and her brothers Robbie and Rory came to Baronshaugh shortly after Glen, successful in negotiating a sullen truce between Dugald and Moncrieff, had gone to keep an engagement, which he had made conditionally, and would not have considered himself bound by, had things been other than they were at home. In his absence, then, these Cochranes arrived, and brought good humour with them.

Grizzel Cochrane was not so entirely captivated by the graces of Dugald Urquhart's conversation as Maryanne Kirkpatrick has been seen to be, but quite as far was she from taking the view held by Ursula Elvester. And as she to Dugald, so Dugald felt to her. She might not be compared to Ursula, that went without saying, but no more could she be classed with the too engaging Maryanne; she was, in fact, what he would call, a quiet loving domestic woman of the second order of merit.

Miss Cochrane, who had a way of putting one on capital terms with oneself, and therefore by consequence with her, listened with interest unfeigned to an account of the Fyfe-

Armstrong complication, and without blaming either the artist or Moncrieff—blame was not a commodity dealt in by the Cochranes—refreshed Dugald with the grateful balm of her sympathy (she had only Dugald's version to judge from, bear in mind). Having heard Mr Urquhart lengthily air his grievance, she in the end changed the subject by asking the gentleman to do her a favour, a great favour, to write a few original verses in her new poetry-album. The book was at hand, she had brought it with her for possible contributions. Would Mr Urquhart write something? he knew so well how; and would he at once? Mr Urquhart would, he said, be most delighted to oblige, but really he was afraid the Muse might not be forthcoming just at a moment's notice; and as for himself, he feared he was not exactly in a proper vein. Of course, if Miss Cochrane should insist, why then he must do his best, but— The end was that the Muse and he both allowed themselves to be over-persuaded, and before many minutes an address was being composed to—

‘ Sweet Rintle water, limpid stream,
That through Laighbiel’s green valley glides.’

Grizzel, thus free to bestow her attention elsewhere, now learned, by inference, that Moncrieff had been the undisputed belle of the Baillie Geddes’ recent garden-party. So she rejoiced in Moncrieff’s joy—and it is a harder thing to rejoice with them that do rejoice than to weep with them that weep. Then she complimented Christian on the sensation which Glen’s acting in a theatrical performance at Dreichwinnock the other night had produced, and, joined by Robbie and Rory, insisted that Glen’s wife too could make a sensation in private theatricals, if she only chose. There was no insincerity here; the Cochranes simply said all the good-natured things they could, and kept all the ill-natured things back; and if they did make their friends feel too complaisant sometimes, it was an error that there were plenty of other friends ready enough to put right.

It was a pleasing scene which Glen’s eyes fell upon, when, some time after, he passed

through the first, and paused near the door of the middle drawing-room. His wife and her visitors were having afternoon tea—rather had had it, all but Dugald, who still stopped occasionally in his tribute to the Rintle, to raise his cup abstractedly to his lips. Moncrieff was gracefully ornamenting one end of a window-seat. She had fallen into a gratified brown-study over a something complimentary which had been made known to her by Grizzel, and corroborated by Robbie and Rory. All unheeded by her was the wild Shetland tale, which her cousin's wife, seated by her side, was telling, and telling with a great deal of unconscious dramatic force, to the admiring Cochranes. Not to interrupt, Glen stayed unnoticed in the back-ground, and heard about a far-back ancestress of the Elvesters, who lost three sons by drowning, all on one afternoon, but proudly braving fate, would not let fall a tear.

A man's own admiration of a woman is never lessened by observing that others admire her as well as he; and Glen felt

particularly satisfied with himself at this moment, as the possessor of a wife so greatly calculated to please. At the conclusion of the story he went in and began to make himself agreeable. To Christian among the rest, for to her he said,—

‘You dawn on one gradually ; but I see I’ve got to congratulate you on having the true story-teller’s gift, my love.’

He was not accustomed to call her his love, nor was she willing that he should do so, while she was his love only in name ; still less, that he should do so only that the world might hear. Therefore with a carelessly smiling—‘Why, any one can tell a story, surely,’ she rose up from beside him, and leaving him with Grizzel and Moncrieff, gave her attention to Robbie and Rory.

These youths chanced to stray into the near vicinity of the contributor to their sister’s album, and their animated talk, mingled with Christian’s low laughter, seriously interfered with the free play of poetic fancy. That, no doubt, was the reason why, as soon as the Dreichwinnock visitors had taken leave,

Dugald remarked to his cousin (quite between themselves of course, and no offence meant to the lady) that, if he were a married man, he would not permit his wife to encourage the empty chatter of such a pair of magpies as Robert and Roderick Cochrane.

Glen laughed at that.

‘Wives generally,’ he said, ‘bachelors’ wives excepted, have a way of doing pretty much as they please.’

‘My wife shall do as *I* please,’ quoth Dugald.

And immediately after dinner he went to seek an interview with her whom he had in mind when he thus autocratically delivered himself; with what result, we have already seen.

‘I believe Dugald will marry Ursula Elvester,’ sighed Moncrieff to Christian, on hearing whitheraway her brother was bound. ‘Fancy marrying people who keep only one servant, and haven’t even the smallest of button-boys to make them a little respectable. Oh! excuse me; I really forgot about your being one of them; so awkward of me, wasn’t it? And a single servant *is*, you know—’

‘Too disgraceful to be discussed,’ said Christian. ‘We ought to be ashamed, perhaps; but somehow we aren’t. And my sister Jenny says that her single servant is better to her than anybody else’s regiment.’

‘But think of having to do one’s own hair!’ ejaculated Moncrieff.

‘Yes, think of it!’ rejoined Christian, laughing. ‘Of course your brother must not marry a girl who has come so low as that. But you needn’t fear Ursula in any case. You fancy your brother cares for her—that I know nothing about—but I am very sure that she cares nothing at all for him.’

‘I wish you would tell her that he isn’t one bit good-natured,’ resumed Moncrieff, just as if she had not heard the assurance. ‘You could say that she would find him so tiresomely prosy, if she knew him well. He can talk only of quantities of dry old mouldy topics nobody minds about. And when I have had my hair much dressed, he has often said he would think it more natural and becoming if it were brushed straight out

into two parts and tied under the chin. *That* is Dugald! Oh, I am positive your sister wouldn't like him to live always with. Will you tell her, Christina?'

'I'm afraid I can't promise to talk to my sister about anything like that.'

'Then I'll ask Glen to do it.'

'Glen would not dare.'

'Perhaps not if *you* wanted him, but he does anything for *me*. Where is he? and what is he doing?'

'He is in the library reading.'

'How slow! And he is always reading, or writing, or doing something dreary. No man but he would go poking about in a library all alone, like a hermit in a cell. So selfish, isn't it?'

'Do you think so? For me, I wouldn't choose to have my husband keeping by me like a shadow all the day. It would become monotonous.'

'I daresay it would, if the husband were *Dugald*. I shall ask Glen to tell your sister so, and to be sure he says "monotonous," for that just describes what Dugald is.'

But a letter was now brought to Moncrieff, which put Dugald, and Ursula, and everything else out of mind for the present. A mighty mystery was made of that letter, and great care taken that Christian should not catch a glimpse of the handwriting on the envelope or the coat of arms on the seal; indeed, Moncrieff carried precaution so far as to discover that she was 'so quite distressingly oppressed with lassitude' that, early as the hour was—and Moncrieff was not addicted to early hours—she would be obliged to say good-night. She retired accordingly, with her bedroom candle and her secret.

Christian had scarcely begun to enjoy the lull which followed, when Glen came from the library. Very fair in his eyes she looked, and none the less so for being skilfully dressed in the gracefulest fantasia of silk and lace that mind of woman could devise. Christian, once more than usually indifferent about what she wore, had become most painstaking with her toilet now-a-days, for she was determined that she would be, to use the words of Mrs

Brackenburn, 'a something pleasant to look at in the house.'

Glen came and took her hand, so to prevent one possible way out of the argument he was about to re-open.

'Now, don't be frightened,' he said, as she looked up questioningly, 'for I'm not going to hurt you, as I did once before. I only mean to secure that you shall sit still and hear reason.'

'I can do that without being held,' she said, not, however, attempting to take her hand away. This was no caress, so could be borne.

'Yes, but would you? I am not so sure of it; indeed, your past treatment of me makes me doubt it altogether. But you're going to be a good girl now, Christian. I'm not to have another naysay, am I?'

She coloured deeply red, and lowered her lashes. It would be easy enough to be a good girl, if only—oh! if only Glen felt towards her as a husband should. The fact being otherwise, she said,—

'Am I a fool, that you keep me saying my words over so often?'

‘If you were a fool, I should make allowance for and excuse you. As it is, I will admit, for argument’s sake, that you have not even been acting foolishly. But, taking your own ground, and granting your conduct to have been thoroughly reasonable, haven’t I been punished sufficiently yet for anything you have seen amiss in me? What would you have more?’

‘Either you have quite missed my meaning,’ she said, ‘or you don’t choose to see; for it is not that I wish to punish you; it is only that I am a proud woman, who will not be made a plaything of.’

‘Who wants to make a plaything of you? I don’t. I simply claim what is my right. You won’t deny, I suppose, that I have the right?’

‘Legally, but not morally, Glen.’

‘Not morally! Tell me, Christian, what does this signify?’ and he touched the ring on the third finger of the hand which lay free in her lap.

‘It means partly that I am bound to do all I can for your happiness,’ was her reply. ‘And so I will. But what you want just

now has nothing to do with your happiness.'

'What do you take me for?' he cried. 'Has it nothing to do with my happiness, do you imagine, that my wife should persistently turn her back on me in this fashion?'

He was in downright earnest, that was plain; but then Christian thought it was only the earnestness of a man who, used to command, is unexpectedly thwarted in some notion, and therefore becomes the more determined to carry his purpose through.

'I need not stand here begging for what I could, without much trouble, extort,' said he, never guessing her thoughts. 'But I shouldn't care for such a kiss as that would be,' he continued, persuasively; and his tone could be very persuasive when there was cause,—'I must have one freely granted. Come, Christian,—my little wife—'

So saying, he, for the second time since their misunderstanding, bent towards her to take a kiss.

On this occasion, as on that, she eluded him, so that it was not her lips that met his,

but only her brown hair that brushed his face. Balked in his design, he straightened himself and stood looking down at her.

‘Where has the girl I married gone?’ he ejaculated; ‘and who is this that I have got instead of her?’

‘I am sorry you have been mistaken in me,’ she replied.

‘Don’t be sorry; be satisfactory: that is all I ask.’

‘Glen,’ she said gently, but with the gentleness that means no yielding, ‘if I had asked you for any favour, and you had denied it to me, no matter though I had believed you to be wrong or foolish, I don’t think you would have had to deny me twice.’

At this appeal to his pride, he dropped her hand, and his face grew darker than she had ever seen it. He did not speak at once; but when he did, the concentrated displeasure of his tone made his wife wince.

‘You do well to remind me,’ he said; ‘but in truth it is a new experience to me, this of entreating for a—favour, shall I call it?—once denied. I have done, however; the

denial shall not have to be repeated again. For I vow that the first "favour" which passes between us shall be offered by you to me, and offered, too, unsought.'

With that, he strode from the room, leaving Christian a good deal frightened, if it must be owned, at the final result of her contumacy.





CHAPTER VII.

IN THE FIELDS AT EVENTIDE.

‘And ye shall walk in silk attire,
And siller ha’e tae spare,
Gin ye’ll consent to be his bride
Nor think o’ Donald mair.’

I ha’e nocht to offer ye,
Nae gowd frae mine, nae pearl frae sea,
Nor am I come o’ high degree—
Lassie, but I lo’e ye.’



MR URQUHART made several further endeavours to see Ursula alone, unsuccessful endeavours, for not once, either at The Brae or at Barons-haugh, could he catch his queen of lilies without Ulrica beside her. Yet it did not convey itself to him that Ursula was responsible for this. Nothing doubted Dugald but that Ursula must be as much put out of gear as himself by the continual supervision of that

exasperating little sister of hers, and his astonishment would nearly have reached as high as his anger, if he had been told that it was by Ursula's express command that Ulrica hovered ever in attendance.

After spending a few days at Barons-haugh, he, accompanied by Moncrieff, returned to Craigie Urquhart, that sanitarium being once more habitable; and from thence in a day or two came a prolix letter, addressed to Miss Ursula Elvester, and subscribed—

‘Yours (if you will) till death do part us,
‘DUGALD.’

The tone all through, to the ‘Dugald’ at the end, implied that nothing else than willingness was contemplated. And this troubled Ursula. She had heard it said that it must be a girl's own fault if a man proposes to her; yet she was perfectly certain that Mr Urquhart's assurance was no work of hers. He dwelt in his letter on her ‘shrinking sensibility,’ and ‘coy ways—pretty harmless coquetry,’ but if he had been blind enough to mistake dislike for sensibility, and coldness for coquetry, whose blame was it but his own?

Without loss of time Ursula thanked Mr Urquhart for the honour he had done her, but told him what she took comfort in telling to herself sometimes, that she meant to live and die a single woman.

She was in the garden when the return communication arrived. It was brought to her by Miss Elvester. There is an uncomfortableness about receiving the reply letter from a suitor who has just been rejected, and Ursula's hand was not quite so steady as usual when she broke the seal. No prolixity this time; for once Dugald had forgotten to be wordy: stern and to the purpose was the style in which he, so confident, acknowledged his repulse.

‘MADAM’ (so the note ran),—‘ The decision at which you have arrived is, I humbly think, very much more to be deplored for your own sake than for mine.—I remain, Madam, your obedient servant, DUGALD URQUHART.’

The first letter Ursula alone had seen. This one she passed to her sister, who still stood

beside her among the lilacs. That lady smiled as she handed it back.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘do you not like it much?’

‘It is to be deplored for *my* sake! For *mine*!’ rejoined Ursula. ‘It is scarcely to be supposed I should like that.’

‘I like it,’ said Miss Elvester, ‘for it is just the most exquisitely characteristic thing I have ever met with in the way of letter-writing. To me there is a fine sense of satisfaction in seeing a man act up to himself, and the delightful symmetry of this, when taken along with your friend’s personality, leaves nothing to be wished for.’

But to Ursula there was no fine sense of satisfaction in the symmetry; so when Miss Elvester, still smiling, remarked,—

‘He has left you no room for repentance, you observe; you may rue your decision, but you may not amend it.’

The reply was,—

‘There is no chance of my rueing it. I have sometimes been forced by circumstances to sit beside Mr Urquhart for a whole even-

ing; but in no possible circumstances *could* I marry him.'

'You would get a pair of leather gloves, and go out as a housemaid rather?'

'Yes; if I must make the choice.'

'Happily, you need not make the choice; but all the same, I admire your spirit.'

'And ought not I to have spirit? Am I not an Elvester?'

'Ay—a daughter of the Sea-kings, as Ulrica says. And at this minute you do look much more like the princess who waved aside the minister of Bresta as no mate for her, than the sister of charity who has for months past been doing her utmost for the neglected girls of Laighfield. But, if I may say so, I consider the Ursula of The Brae a vast improvement on the Ursula of Eastravoe.'

So in the morning. But it was what Miss Elvester called the Ursula of The Brae, who set out that afternoon, with a little basket of etceteras for a sick-room over her arm, to visit a member of her class who lay ill at Auldhame, a farm near the village of Dykeside. The grey-clad stately-stepping sister

of charity was familiar to Laighbield eyes by this time ; and thought so well of too, that there was not a single captious criticism concerning her as she went through the village, nor one dissentient voice among the sitters about Mrs Gillespie's entry, when it was said, and said by no less easily pleased a person than Mrs Gillespie herself,—

‘It's nane o' your candle-light beauties, yon! *She* can thole the guid braid glower o' day fu' brawly.’

Mrs Gillespie's praise of one, you see, was always set off by censure, either expressed or implied, of the many.

It felt good to be out in the country on such an afternoon. There were breeze and brightness—while fleecy white clouds made constantly changing pictures on the blue, and cast fitful shadows athwart the autumn fields. Reaping-machines not being very much in vogue about Laighbield as yet, the ‘shearers’ were at work : men whose faces stamped them Emerald Islanders ; women whose features were effectually screened from observation as well as from the sun by calico

bonnets—white, pink, buff, green, or blue. The farm-house of Auldhame was a one-storey, white-washed line of building, with a strip of flower-plot all along the front, bordered with none-so-pretty (I give Laigh-bield nomenclature), and crowded with such effective favourites as blue-bonnets, bachelors'-buttons, ladies'-bags, Aaron's-rods, touch-me-nots, and gardeners'-garters. The principal door opened into a passage between the dairy and the large, white-flagged, wooden-raftered kitchen, where the household was, when Ursula got admittance, convened at the evening meal. Master, mistress, sons, daughters, servants, reapers, all sat round; and that without even 'the pale spectrum of the salt' as a dividing line. Ursula did not pause a moment here to disturb the good people at their supper (their name for it was supper; you would have called it a 'high' tea); but went through at once to the room beyond, the sick girl's chamber. There she remained a long time, reading and sympathising; indeed, afternoon had passed into evening before she left Auldhame.

The Rintle—Dugald Urquhart's 'limpid stream'—curved and twisted in the most arbitrary fashion all the way between Laighbiel and Dykeside, thus making the road three times longer than it might have been. When Ursula came to a turn of the river, where by crossing on stepping-stones a considerable round-about would be spared, and saw that the sun was just sliding into the distant Frith, she judged it as well to take the short cut ; so made her way down the bank, through the aromatic queen-of-the-meadows and the wandering tendrils of the blaeberry, and commenced to cross the stream.

On the farther side, a short distance off, was a small neat cottage, set in a small neat garden, and inhabited by her whom it pleased Mrs Brackenburn to describe as 'the nicest woman in Laighbiel.' Ursula saw the nicest woman standing in the open doorway ; but she did *not* notice the man sitting under the willow whose branches swept the stream. She had scarcely left the bank, however, when again raising her eyes, she perceived Donald Berwick quitting his willow-screen.

At the unexpected sight of a man where no man had been, she started, the smooth stone upon which she was in the act of adventuring her foot turned half round, and Ursula slipped into the Rintle. Nothing makes one cut a more ridiculous figure than an accident of this kind in shallow water. The dignity of danger is absent, and the victim of mischance, while with an agonised smile he attempts to make it appear that he does not mind at all—rather takes the thing as a little joke,—cannot but be conscious that onlookers, though they may guilefully condole, are sorely put to it to keep up a due measure of outward decorum to veil the mirth within.

This was the second catastrophe of the sort which had chanced to Ursula, and just as on the Auchterbrechan shore, there was help at hand. Only, she did not wait for the help this time, but slowly got to her feet again—the slowness was by way of proving that she had not been disconcerted much—and went on to meet Mr Berwick in the middle of the stream. She had no need of his assistance, none whatever; but assistance

has a trick of keeping away when wanted, and then when not required, of thrusting itself upon people, whether they will or no. More assistance than Mr Berwick's offered itself, and assistance for which there really was a call : when the miserable one stepped dripping up the margin, with skirts that seemed to have turned to cloth-of-lead, so coldly and weightily they clung about her ankles, the mistress of the cottage stood ready to receive her.

Miss Berwick was a large and a very handsome woman ; her features were striking ; her hair—chesnut and curly as her nephew's—was gathered up under a quaint mob-cap, and her soft black gown was worn open at the chest, as is the old fashion, to display the snowy cambric kerchief beneath. Unmarried though she were, she was an essentially motherly person ; and it seemed as natural as possible that Ursula, who, by the way, had never met her before, should almost immediately find herself comfortably settled at a cosy fireside, waiting till the wet clothes should be dry. Not a word of apology for the trouble would Miss Berwick hear, and

Miss Berwick's nephew assured Ursula that the obligation was all on the other side.

'For,' said he, 'my aunt is never so well pleased as when somebody gets into trouble and gives her an excuse for good-samaritan-ship. She won't confess to it, but I suspect her of owing me a grudge because I have never given her the chance of nursing me through some desperate illness. But I'm in no anxiety to oblige her. Hers is the very poetry of nursing, I allow; still—'

'Heard you ever the like!' interposed his kinswoman. 'No, Donald, no; I have never yet been so sore opprest with idleset, that I have hankered after such a fearsome handling as the sick-nursing of you would be. But here come the things, fit to put on again, so the young lady will get back to The Brae or ever she has been missed; and Miss Elvester winna need to send the bell-man through to "cry" her lost sister.'

If Donald Berwick expected his aunt to be rapturous on the score of Ursula's beauty, he was disappointed.

'A pale bit thing!' said the matter-of-fact

Scotchwoman, when the girl had gone to dress. 'What ails the lassie, that she has tined the roses from her cheeks?'

'I don't imagine she ever had roses to tine,' said Mr Berwick, stooping down to examine a fuchsia on the window-sill. 'Hers is no barn-door beauty. But you must have seen her many a time; was she not always so pale? You don't fancy her growing paler, do you?'

'Keep me! *I* takena' tent of ladies' looks, so that I can answer how the colour comes and goes; but be the roses we speak of faded, or be it that they never were in blow, they will behoove to show themselves belyve; winna they, Donald?'

'What may you mean by that?' he asked, still admiring the fuchsia.

'And what should I mean by it, trow ye?—ah, there's her dainty foot on the stair! Yes, away with you; and blithe may you be that the whimsy took you to give a keek in at the Neuk this day.'

When Ursula saw that she was to be accompanied on her way, she demurred.

‘It is not as if I were unaccustomed to be out alone,’ she said. ‘Tell your nephew, Miss Berwick, that he must not come with me.’ For she thought, of course, that Miss Berwick’s visitor would by this time be due at the glittering halls of Mr Langbiggin.

‘My nephew is a wilful man,’ replied Miss Berwick; ‘he winna be ruled by me. But even although he would do my bidding, could I say to him to stay behind and let a young lady walk two miles in the gloamin’ by her leesome lane? No, no; I could never bide the thought of that.’

So Ursula and Mr Berwick went forth from the Neuk together.

Instead of threading Laighbiold, they took their way as the crow would fly, right across the fields. The reapers were gone; the glamour of dusk was come; there was light enough to reveal the yellowness of the ‘stooks’ of corn, but not enough to show how ruddy all the hedges were with haws. It was the soft half-light favourable to lovers’ confidences; and it seemed a pity that this pair should abuse the gift as they were doing.

Both one and the other wished to avoid awkward silences, and in order to this, both pitched on remarks the most utterly common-place ; so that Ursula was reminded of a brief colloquy she had heard to-day between a farmer's wife in a gig and a stone-breaker by the wayside.

‘Terrible blawy !’ had cried the lady from her gig.

‘Can ye no’ tell us something ’at we dinna ken a’ready ?’ the man had cynically inquired, without any pause in his metal-chipping.

Surely that saturnine stone-breaker would have laughed aloud, if he had been within earshot of Ursula and Mr Berwick as they so assiduously kept talking against time.

All the while there was something that Ursula had it in her mind to say to Donald Berwick, which he did *not* know already. She had often thought about it lately—she had been thinking of it when she fell into the Rintle ; telling herself that she must sometime say it, that it was only pride which kept her silent now, that such pride ought to be overcome ;—and it should. If the opportu-

nity were given, she *would* humble herself. And here the opportunity was. Now to make use of it. Two or three times she trembled on the verge of utterance, and as often with painfully beating heart drew back again into common-place. Once she even began, and got so far as—

‘ Mr Berwick, I wish to— ’

When seeing her companion become all attention, she lost courage and haltingly brought up her sentence thus :—

‘ To get home as fast as possible.’

In the end, Mr Berwick unconsciously helped her. Over against Laighbiel aspired the white pinnacles of Laurelville, the tangible result which that mercantile gentleman, Mr Langbiggin, had achieved for himself out of bonnet-manufacturing.

‘ Is not that pretty well in the way of success ? ’ said the minister of Auchterbrechan. ‘ Even Mrs Inverarity has found that trade pays better than literature, we see.’

‘ I don’t understand,’ replied Ursula ; ‘ I don’t know anything about Mrs Inverarity.’

‘Ah, you are above the tittle-tattle of the place. Yet I should have thought you must have chanced to hear what Laighbiel is rolling as a sweet morsel under its tongue these days: the author of “The Ten Lost Tribes,” “Israel’s Future,” “The Year of Jubilee,” etc., is going to lay aside her weeds and queen it at Laurelvile as Mrs Langbiggin.’

‘I thought Mr Langbiggin was past the age for marrying,’ said Ursula—she could not fall upon anything else to say.

‘I have never been able to find out yet what that age is,’ was the reply. ‘Anyhow, Mr Langbiggin has the excuse that he is about to lose his niece, for Miss Langbiggin, too, has made up her mind to marry, one of these days.’

Here was a most suitable opening; there would not come another so good. Ursula felt that she must seize it.

‘I have been told about Miss Langbiggin’s intended marriage,’ she said, in tones which a strong effort of self-control on the speaker’s part rendered perfectly steady; ‘and your

mentioning it to me gives me leave to say something which I feel I ought to say. You remember what passed when you came to Eastravoe, one day just before we left ?'

It seemed to her a long, long time before she got an answer ; and when Donald Berwick did reply that the interview she referred to was still fresh in his memory, there was a change in his voice ; it sounded to Ursula as it had sounded on *that* afternoon, and as it had often rung in her ears, when all was silent, since. And she held her breath.

'Why do you ask ?' he continued, in his strangely-altered manner. 'What have you now to say to me about that—that—blunder I committed ?'

'I desire to apologise to you, Mr Berwick—not for my answer, that I had a right to give, but for my silliness in behaving as I did—actually speaking to you as I might have spoken to an inferior. I have learned better since. I know now how shameful my folly was, and how the unworthiness lay not on your side, but on mine.'

Repressed feeling thrilled through every word, and altogether Donald Berwick had a difficulty in accepting the evidence of his senses. Could it be Ursula who spoke?—could Ursula have come to such an extreme of humility as this? But Ursula it indeed was; Ursula, impelled by her strong sense of duty.

‘I should like you to say that you have forgiven me,’ she resumed, before he could trust his voice to utterance. ‘Of course I must not have told you this, if it had not been that you are engaged to Miss Langbiggin.’

That hurried him out of his silence.

‘Not I,’ he said. ‘Miss Langbiggin is engaged, it is true, but not to me.’

‘Not to you?’

‘Oh no!—to the United Presbyterian minister of Laighbiel.’

‘But they said—I thought—’ Ursula’s tongue failed her.

‘What supreme nonsense people talk—yes, and will believe! But *you*—could you credit it?’

She did not answer. How could she?

She had begged this man's pardon for having slighted him, and—and he was *not* engaged. A stile barred the way. In helping Ursula over, her companion managed to get a glimpse of her face. It was a revelation to him.

‘Let us stand still for a moment,’ he said, as she alighted; ‘for I too have something to say.’

So by the stile they stood, with clasped hands—for he would not let go—facing each other.

But it is no business of ours to inquire what tale Ursula listened to in the fields at eventide; it is enough for us, that before Donald Berwick was done, the daughter of the Sea-kings, who had once rejected him—the girl who had made up her mind to live and die single—was sobbing, but not for sorrow, in his arms.





CHAPTER VIII.

A SEVERE CRITIC.

‘Be niggards of advice on no pretence,
For the worst avarice is that of sense ;
With mean complaisance ne’er betray your trust,
Nor be so civil as to prove unjust.’

ULERICA had been invited to walk with Ursula to Auldhame, but had excused herself ; for, though she did not say so to her sister, she was under engagement to read a certain manuscript story to Mysie to-day ; and Mysie was such a valuable and trustworthy servant that it would never do to disappoint her.

In course of the afternoon, accordingly, Miss Elvester, from a window commanding a view of the garden, espied Ulrica perched on the bough of a plum-tree, reading to

Mysie, who was seated beneath, paring and coring apples. More correctly, Mysie *had* been paring and coring apples: an apple, with a long curl of rind depending from it, was in one hand, a knife was in the other; but the mind of Miss Elvester's valuable and trusty servant was engrossed in Ulrica's fiction.

Ulrica's propensity for scribbling had of late become serious. For the sake of her pen, everything else was either being carelessly slurred over or altogether neglected; so that Miss Elvester saw that, if harm were not to come of the matter, a check must be administered; and the spectacle of Ulrica in the plum-tree decided her to administer it now. Not at this very moment—the interruption would be too cruel both to Ulrica and to Mysie; let them enjoy themselves for one brief hour. She therefore waited patiently till the reading was over and the reader had come indoors.

Not guessing what was in store, Ulrica placed herself at her sister's work-table, and began to make herself troublesome with the pin-cushion. A chain of rowans was wound

about and about her neck, and a second was intertwined with the bright gold of her hair ; and Miss Elvester, looking on the very pretty picture, exclaimed,—

‘Vanity of vanities !’

But Ulrica’s vanity was not on the score of personal appearance, nor did she know what an exquisite foil the rich red berries made to her fairness.

‘It was Mysie who strung them and put them on me,’ she said. ‘I was sorry about her having taken so much trouble, for they will wither so soon.’

‘Was it to repay her for the trouble, that you have been reading to her for the last hour ?’

Ulrica having pulled every pin out of the pin-cushion, was replacing them so as to form the initials J. M. E., and she went on with her letter-making, giving no reply.

‘Yes ; that is very nice,’ said Miss Elvester. ‘I shall quite regret having to remove them when they shall be wanted by-and-by. But when you have finished my monogram, there is something else I should like you to

do for me ; I, too, want to hear your story, my dear.'

To this Ulrica strongly objected ; for it was one thing to read her sounding periods and unique ideas to an admiring Mysie ; quite another to submit them to the scrutiny of a sister Jenny. It was with extreme reluctance, therefore, that she obeyed. Still, after a while she did produce her manuscript, and having done this, would have retired. But that would not meet the views of the intending critic ; so Miss Elvester said,—

'I wish you to remain. It is but right you should hear one candid opinion about this production.'

The answering plea, that she had heard a candid opinion—Mysie's opinion was perfectly candid—only evoked the reply,—

'That may be ; but you will perhaps admit that my opinion is rather more likely to be correct than Mysie's. At all events, I choose that you shall also have mine. Sit down, pray you.'

Ulrica said in her heart that Jenny was

‘much too imperious.’ Nevertheless she sat down as desired, and prepared to defend herself, even as it might be given her.

‘I am sorry I can’t congratulate you on your handwriting,’ was the opening comment ; ‘you can write better than this, you know.’

‘Good writing is the dunce’s talent,’ said Ulrica.

‘You enlighten me ; and bad writing is the sign of intellectual greatness, I suppose. Judging so, you must be a genius ; for your penmanship here is worse than execrable. You have affected back-hand ; does that also mark an original mind ?’

‘It takes less space than the copy-book slope does,’ Ulrica said.

‘I see ; and space *is* an object, when one’s supply of paper is limited. But now, how do you call your tale ? for I perceive no title-page.’

‘The story isn’t finished ; and I’ve not yet decided on a title.’

‘So the title comes last ! I did not know ; I am new to the ways of authorship. Well, to begin :—“Chapter First. A Remarkable Girl.

Jane Jack was a very remarkable girl. She was not at all lovely, but she was the most intellectual of her family, and Mind is more than Beauty; for Mind remains when Beauty has passed away.’”

‘Does “Jane Jack” stand for Ulrica Elvester?’

‘Indeed not, Jenny. You are just like Mysie, who thinks every character must be meant for some one I know. But they’re not; they are all out of my own head, every bit.’

‘That is reassuring. But why call your heroine such an unromantic name as “Jane Jack?”’

‘In ordinary books they call the nice girl “Amy Leigh” or “Lucy May,” or something else that will sound fine; so, as I wanted to be different, I called mine just “Jane Jack.”’

‘You belong to the realistic school, it would appear. This “Jane Jack,” then, was not “a lovely girl,”—by the way, we used to spell that adjective with an *e* when I was at school—but she had a lovely sister. The second Miss Jack *was* beautiful—even astonishingly so—“when the roses were kindled in her countenance.” Roses are not kindled, Ulrica.’

‘I beg your pardon, Jenny; but I read some quite charming lines in Miss Grizzel Cochrane’s poetry-album about “sun-kindled roses in gardens gay.”’

‘I own myself corrected. By a rose-kindled countenance you mean, in common English, a sunburnt face. You should put a footnote to that effect, else you lay yourself open to the charge of obscurity.’

‘Oh, please, give it back to me,’ cried Ulrica. ‘It is my own; I made it; and I don’t want you to read it, since you only find out faults.’

‘I’ll not read it through; I shall but look over one chapter. Which is the best, Ulrica? Tell me your favourite part, that I may confine myself to that.’

Ulrica declined to indicate her favourite part; and she sighed in bitterness of soul as her sister made haphazard choice of a passage and silently scanned the same.

Before many minutes the manuscript was returned to its author, and criticism commenced.

‘You are right about your heroine,’ said

Miss Elvester. "Jane Jack" was a very remarkable girl. That was a striking adventure she had in Cadzow Forest, when she put to rout a herd of infuriated cattle—"the original white cattle of Caledonia," as you call them, by simply waving her portfolio of sketches in their face. It is not mentioned in the text, but there must have been magic in that portfolio; was it perhaps a gift from Fairyland?'

'I don't write fairy tales!' was the indignant disclaimer.

'I cry your pardon; I should have known you were above that—you, who undertake the minute description of a forest which you have never seen.'

'I've heard that Coleridge never saw the Vale of Chamouni.'

'Oh, if you couple your name with that of Coleridge, I have done speaking.'

'I have seen other forests, if not Cadzow.'

'So you have; and with persons of genius to have seen one means to be able to describe any—Epping will do for Sherwood, or the Black Forest for Bois de Boulogne. How de-

lightly convenient. One need not travel at all at that rate.'

'You are so very unkind,' cried Ulrica. 'I did not ask you to read my story; I did not want you to read it, for I knew—I knew you would only mock at it.'

'My dear child, if three-fourths of the young ladies and gentlemen afflicted with the scribbling mania were treated by their guardians with just such unkindness, an incalculable saving of the time and temper of publishers, editors, and reviewers would ensue. You think this effort a very wonderful piece of imaginative literature; but if you should cast your eyes upon it some few years hence, you will judge otherwise. Listen to me, my dear; you possess neither the experience nor the education necessary to authorship; you have much to learn before you can write anything in the least worth reading, and the time you spend ill, scribbling, would be spent well in mastering those dry and troublesome facts and details which you would so much rather neglect.'

'I know, I know,' said Ulrica; 'all you

mind about people is that they should be well-informed. What I care for is being original.'

'What I care about is being properly educated. Even a genius requires education ; and you will get laughed at by others besides me, if you pose as a woman of intellect, while you spell lovely without *e* and write of a water-fall as "this roaring avalanche." I once heard a rather pretentious person express surprise on being told about icicles formed by the spray of the Falls of Niagara; she thought that *salt* water almost never froze. And again, talking of the Philippines, she supposed that the language of the Malays would be Spanish. That lady would not have been the worse for the well-informedness which you depreciate, would she? As it was, she might be original ; but I beg you will never make your friends ashamed of you in that way.'

'I don't mean ever to make my friends ashamed of me,' said Ulrica.

'In that case you will lay aside your pen for half-a-dozen years at the very least. This

may seem a hard saying, but I can't help it. You are not able to write; what we have here is the merest childishness.'

'Mysie thinks it is quite as nice as "Uncle Tom's Cabin,"' returned poor Ulrica.

'Why as "Uncle Tom's Cabin," in the name of wonder?' exclaimed Miss Elvester.

Ulrica did not say; she pressed her lips tightly together, for her feelings were fast becoming too much for her.

'I should be delighted if this story were indeed the brilliant achievement you imagine it,' resumed her sister. 'But it is not so, my poor Ulrica; it is only a perfectly impossible piece of idle fancy-work—neither more nor less. I don't say, mind you, that you will never be able to write; indeed, it is not improbable that, when you have reached the years called of discretion, you may produce something really readable; and if so, there is no one in the world who will be more heartily glad than I. Meantime I must ask you to attend to your studies and let romancing alone. And I hope I shall not have to speak to you on the subject again.'

‘ You shall not,’ responded Ulrica, in a constrained voice. And she rose and left the parlour, not in any haste, but walking proudly and slowly, so that it might not be guessed how hurt and angry she was.

Miss Elvester was fully conscious of her own severity ; but after a livelong summer’s petting at Hilyascord such a wholesome tonic as this was, she believed, a requisite and necessary thing. Nor was she in the least afraid that she might have been nipping genius in the bud by her frosty comments and counsels. If Ulrica’s aspirations should be killed by present discouragement, why, they had no claim to live ; but if any real talent were in the girl, there was no fear—it would not so be crushed. So Miss Elvester sat still contentedly for an hour after Ulrica left her. At the end of that time, her window being open, she was edified by hearing a colloquy between Mysie and a sturdy beggar-man. The latter having been served with a handful of oatmeal and a plate of soup, condescendingly put the meal into his wallet, and then, having tasted the soup, ejaculated,—

‘Ay, ay, my lassie, an’ ca’ ye this kail?’

Mysie wondered if he could tell her how it could have been better.

‘Bravely!’ he answered; ‘jist by ha’ein’ a stoupfu’ less water intilt. Od, woman! I wull ha’e to cast the coat aff me, an’ soom’ (swim) ‘for a pea.’

Mysie regretted that such an epicure should have found his way to The Brae at all. But his answer was,—

‘A city set on an hill cannot be hid.’

A most ungrateful and ungracious beggarman!

At this Miss Elvester put her work aside, and speedily sent the connoisseur in soup about his business, which having done, she went upstairs to see what her little sister was about. Opening the door of Ulrica’s room, she beheld a sorry spectacle. On the floor lay the unlucky manuscript, torn into shreds, and in the midst of the ruins sat the authoress. Poor little authoress! she had taken the adverse criticism very grievously amiss, even to the extent of wishing that she could but

get at once beyond the reach of all such woe. She had been pondering as to whether it would be a sin to seek death by starvation. Jenny might perhaps rue her unkindness when an unappreciated sister should be no more. If she had been a boy, Ulrica knew what she would have done—she would have run away to sea ; but for a girl was no such resource, except starvation indeed, no resource at all. And thinking it over, starvation could not surely be called a sin, for it was not killing oneself, but only letting oneself die. She had just reached this conclusion, when the door opened, and her sister came in. Ulrica took no notice; she would neither look up nor answer to her name.

‘ This won’t do,’ said Miss Elvester. ‘ I can’t afford to have my little girl on bad terms with me ; nor would she find it pleasant herself, I think.’

Still neither speech nor motion; for a person who meditates starving herself had need to preserve her dignity of bearing.

‘ What ? Are you not going to have anything more to do with me ?’ asked her sister,

stooping over her ; ‘ for that would grieve me very much indeed.’

‘ Ulrica raised her face at last—a tragic face, with lips that, in spite of pride, *would* tremble as they parted.

‘ You are stronger than I,’ she said, ‘ and you can make me do as you like ; but sometime—’ but having got so far, she stopped, fearing to utter that awful threat of remorse in store.

‘ Sometime you will be able to do as you like yourself,’ concluded Miss Elvester, as she supposed the sentence stood in Ulrica’s mind, ‘ and then you will write a book, none daring to prevent you. By all means, my child ; and let it be a grand book—one to teach men how to live. Ah ! don’t transfix me with such reproachful eyes ; I am wholly unable to feel that I have deserved it.’

‘ You have been so cruel to me,’ was the dismal complaint.

‘ Not really cruel, only seemingly so,’ Miss Elvester spoke most kindly now. ‘ Yes, you find it difficult to believe ; but what you

call cruelty is the truest mercy I could show. Try to take that on trust now ; you will see it for yourself afterwards. Put away anger, then ; and come, kiss me, Ulrica.'

'Thank you, but I would rather not to-day,' said Ulrica, coldly ; and she got up from her low position and took shelter behind the window-curtains.

On being repulsed by Ulrica, as Glen Cassillis had been repulsed by Christian a few days before, Miss Elvester was at a standstill for the instant, hardly knowing how to proceed. That momentary pause of hesitation over, she followed her sister to the window, and saying,—

'It takes two to make a quarrel,' leant over the girl's shoulder and lightly kissed the averted cheek ; then, without another word, went out again and closed the door.

The kiss, though taken thus, had a somewhat mollifying effect. After it, the idea of starvation became less attractive than before. Besides, Ulrica had been surely, though gradually, awakening to a consciousness of being hungry. She was loth to admit the

fact; yet so it certainly was. To get the better of this shameful weakness, she saw good to employ herself by picking up the torn paper which strewed the floor like snow-flakes; and while so busied, heard the distant ring of silver, and clatter of china and crystal, which told that the dinner-table was being laid. Ulrica thought of the pudding—her favourite of all puddings—which she had seen Jenny compounding earlier in the day. Yes, yes; she was hungry! No mistake about that now. And must she starve, with that delicious pudding in the very room below? *Could* she do it? On that pudding fell all the blame of the ignoble desire to go down to dinner, which was consuming her. Had it been any other dish, it could have been resisted; but that! but that! In her mental conflict, Ulrica once more approached the window. Two figures were drawing near the house; Ursula and some one so tall that, tall as Ursula was, her head did not reach his shoulder. It was too dark to see his face, but height and gait were sufficient to declare him, and Ulrica's eyes grew wide,

and her lips parted. She had sometimes wondered—and had been snubbed as surely as she mentioned it—why, frequently as Mr Berwick visited Laighbiel, he was never seen at The Brae ; but the question with her now was, why, having held aloof so long, he should present himself at all. Yet, anxious though she was to see Mr Berwick, and to inquire why he had forsaken his old friends all this weary time, she did not go downstairs. Not so ; she would wait till she should be sent for ;—and they would, they must, send for her soon. They did not send, however, and before many minutes Mr Berwick went away. Ulrica had not been called to say good-bye, though they must have known, if they had only thought of it, how greatly she would like to meet him once again. Oh, it was too bad !

It is a hard lesson to learn, that one, so very important to oneself, is so little important to others that they will often overlook one's existence altogether. And Ulrica felt that this simply being let alone was an unkindlier cut than even the criticism of her

story. It appeared that, on the whole, she would rather be wronged than neglected. She need not think of starving herself when all was done ; there would be no satisfaction in it, for nobody would care. This pointed reflection finished what hunger had begun ; so that, at the ringing of the dinner-bell, Ulrica having assumed all the dignity her small person was capable of, made her descent. Her sisters were standing face to face on the dining-room rug. There was an indefinite something about the younger, a sort of glow or halo, as if, thought Ulrica, Princess Ursula had been gathering sunbeams. A spirit of mischief danced in each of Miss Elvester's grey eyes.

‘ And has it come to this ? ’ the lady was saying. ‘ How are the mighty fallen !—Ursula, Ursula ! ’

Ulrica looked from one to the other. Plainly something had happened. She must know what. All her so carefully arranged majesty dropped away from her, and,—

‘ What is it ? ’ she asked. ‘ What does it mean, Jenny ? ’

‘It means orange-blossom, wedding-cake, and bridesmaids,’ replied Miss Elvester.

‘It means,’ said Ursula, with the confusion natural and proper to her position, ‘it means that I am going to marry Donald Berwick.’

Ulrica received the news in a calmly reflective, rather than an exuberant fashion.

‘And now,’ she said, saluting her sister, in token of goodwill, ‘you will have something else to think of than Gowrie Conspiracies and relative minors, my Lady Ursula.’

Then, turning to her other sister,—

‘We shall not grudge Ursula to Mr Berwick; ‘will we, Jenny? You have me left, and I have—’

‘Slyboots,’ said Miss Elvester. ‘Yes; these are sustaining thoughts.’

‘My studies, I was going to say,’ rejoined Ulrica, coming behind her sister’s chair, as Miss Elvester took her place at table. And then she hid her face on Miss Elvester’s shoulder, and whispered penitently,—

‘I’ve been very wicked to you, Jenny; and I felt even wickeder than you could

guess ; but I suppose—' she hesitated a little ; it was not easy to say this—' I mean, I am sure,' she again proceeded, ' that you do know best about what I was so vexed with you because of. And, Jenny, if you wouldn't mind, I should like to kiss you now.'

Ulrica's kiss of reconciliation was at once accepted.





CHAPTER IX.

AN UNJUSTIFIABLE METHOD OF SEEKING MORE LIGHT.

‘ But now, dear Doctor, not to flatter,
There is a most important matter ;
A matter which you never touch on,
A matter which our thoughts run much on ;
A subject, if we right conjecture,
That well deserves a long, long lecture,
Which all the ladies would approve,
The “ Natural History of Love.” ’

ALTHOUGH there had been a wedding in the family already, Ulrica knew absolutely nothing about lovers or their ways, seeing that her sister Christian’s engagement had almost immediately been followed by her own departure to Hilyascord. But chance was in her favour this time, and she would avail

herself of chance. If she might not continue the history of that remarkable girl, 'Jane Jack,' she must amuse herself during hours of leisure in some other way; and if she was not allowed to read about love in books, neither Jenny nor Ursula should be able to hinder her from studying it from the life.

On the day appointed for Mr Berwick's first visit, Ulrica expected to be excused from lessons. That was a delusion; and Ursula's surprise at the very notion of passing over any duty for a reason so inadequate, forced her disappointed pupil to the conclusion that, whatever love was, it could not be the all-absorbing passion which Mysie's favourite ditties celebrated. The heroine of one of these, for example, 'a damsel possessed of great beauty,' who 'stood by her own father's gate,' was represented as addressing her lover in the following melting strains:—

'For six months on bread and cold water,
My parents confined me for you;
Oh! hard-hearted friends to their daughter,
Whose heart is so loyal and true.'

What would a person so unromantically addicted to duty as Ursula was, think of devotion like that ?

The lover of the damsel himself, it had to be owned, did not seem to have appreciated the loyalty and truth so highly as he might have done ; for, so the song went,—

“ Oh, fie ! ” said young Edward ; “ be steady,
And think of the dangers of war.
When the trumpet sounds, I must be ready,
So wed not your gallant hussar. ” ’

Casting this about in her mind, a new light broke on Ulrica. Perhaps Ursula, warned by such examples as the beautiful damsel in question, feared to have her attachment undervalued if she should display it too freely. Perhaps, who knew, she also, might, if required, be ready to submit to the bread-and-cold-water test of constancy ; but meantime was only concealing her abundant warmth of affection under a judicious veil. Ulrica was not sure of this, however, and she could not rest satisfied with mere conjecture ; she must find out for certain.

So, while the studies went on as usual, she kept a strict watch on her sister, hoping sooner or later to be gratified by some faint symptom of an errant mind. It was no use ; Ursula was not to be caught, watched you never so warily. Nobody could have guessed, from any sign she gave, that she cherished one single thought apart from the business of the hour.

Baffled in this line of research, Ulrica had a happy inspiration. She would outwit Ursula ; she would be satisfied whether or not this manner were her sister's only one ; she would be present at the forthcoming interview. Accordingly, when the proper time was come, she made all haste and concealed herself behind a screen in the drawing-room. Her hiding-place proved even better than she had expected, for between the leaves of it she would be able not to hear only but to see. Could anything be more delightful !

Donald Berwick came, and Ulrica spying through her chink approved of him exceedingly. He was so good—so clever—so hand-

some. The handsomeness was merely by the way—a Nero might be handsome, was handsome, Ulrica believed—as the mind expanded, one became less and less sensible to the accidents of feature and form; one ceased to think the jay more precious than the lark, because his painted feathers are more beautiful. Well, handsomeness altogether aside, this was a lover-in-law (so she chose to call him) to be thoroughly satisfied with.

It now remained to be seen how Ursula would carry herself. She did not come at once; and while waiting for her, her lover stood before the largest painting which the room contained: Ursula as a child, playing with a Newfoundland dog on the broad stone terrace in front of the house of Eastravoe. Child and dog, they made a charming study; and Mr Berwick, though he must have seen the picture many times before, became so engrossed in it that when the real Ursula entered he actually did not hear her. That, thought the watcher, was not like the man in the Serenade which Mr Urquhart loved to sing; he who cried—

‘ She is coming, my own, my sweet !
Were it ever so airy a tread,
My heart would hear her and beat,
Were it earth in an earthy bed.
My dust would hear her and beat,
Had it lain for a century dead,
Would start and tremble under her feet,
And blossom in purple and red.’

That lover must have had a very much quicker ear than this. On the whole, Ulrica was beginning to suspect that all songs were vanity. But Ursula did not seem to feel hurt, not a jot. And lo, Ursula *had* two manners—deceiving Ursula ! There was a rosy light on her face and a happy brightness in her eyes ; and, as if she were not quite lovely enough already, she had decked herself with the loveliest flowers in the garden. The scene promised to be interesting, but unfortunately Ulrica’s gratification was alloyed with a horrible inclination to cough. She had not a cold, else she would not have planted herself here ; what troubled her was the dry, tickling sensation in the throat, which will now and then seize persons for no other imaginable reason than to make them disagreeably conspicuous. She did what she

could to choke back the threatened outburst ; and the situation was becoming alarming, when Ursula half whispered,—

‘ Donald, are you dreaming ? ’

Instantly her lover was beside her. She held out her hand, as if she thought he was in the least likely to be content with that. He did not take the slightest notice of it.

‘ My princess,’ he said ; ‘ my beautiful Ursula ! ’ and boldly proceeded to do just as he liked about the salutation. He had still an appropriating arm round Ursula, and he was looking fondly down into the deeps of her eyes, and talking as lovers will, when, hark !—a strangled shriek from behind the screen—then a cough—a quick succession of coughs, forcibly broken from restraint. Finally, Ulrica ran out of her concealment, and with scarlet face and streaming eyes, results of her efforts at suppression, thus addressed the pair :—

‘ Do not think me mad. I wanted to see for myself. I’ve never been allowed to read about love ; but now I know—I know ! ’

And with that she turned and fled, leaving her 'lover-in-law' to deal with her sister's confusion as he might.

It was Ulrica's first essay at eavesdropping, and it was her last. On subsequent visits Donald Berwick took care to assure himself that no third party was lying in ambush behind the screen.





CHAPTER X.

RATIONAL AND IMPROVING.

'The circle formed, we sit in silent state,
Like figures drawn upon a dial-plate,
"Yes, ma'am," and "No, ma'am," utter'd softly, show
Ev'ry five minutes how the minutes go.'

ANNOYANCES are so sociably inclined, that they nearly always pay their visits in company. So Dugald Urquhart, with Mr Fyfe Armstrong's threatened action hanging over him, and Ursula Elvester's inexplicable refusal embittering him, received a summons to South America, the obeying of which would entail an infinitude of pain and exertion. A sister of his mother, married to a landowner in Mexico, had lately been left a widow. Her health was broken; she had

lost all her family ; and her affairs were in so miserable a tangle that she had seen nothing for it but to entreat Dugald to come over and help her. The annoyance to Mr Urquhart was only in the being asked ; to go, he flatly and once and for all refused. His Aunt Nannie, who, he understood, had married a spendthrift and a prodigal, against the urgent advice of all her friends, was only gathering in the harvest she had sowed. If his aunt stood in actual need of money, why, he must send some, he supposed ; but his time and attention, these he would not bestow.

When this became known at Baronshaugh, Christian said,—

‘What is to happen to that poor Aunt Nannie ? Will nobody go to her ?’

‘I will,’ replied Glen ; ‘and the sooner the better, I’m inclined to think.’

‘You !’ exclaimed Christian, with sudden sinking of heart.

In saying, ‘Will nobody go ?’ she had not thought of him. Aunt Nannie was his father’s sister ; but Glen’s father had disowned his sister when she *would* marry

against his will, and there had been no direct communication between her and the Netherlaw Cassillises since.

‘Dugald’s mother and your Aunt Nannie were always friends,’ Christian added. ‘It is Dugald who ought to go.’

This was spoken impulsively. Next moment she was ashamed of herself. How could she be so selfish as to say one word against her husband doing what he would for an aunt in distress?

‘I had nothing to do with my father’s quarrel,’ answered Glen; ‘and whether Dugald ought to go or not, if he won’t, I must. I shall not object to the voyage and the change.’

‘I’m sure you will enjoy them,’ said Christian, putting a bright face on the matter. ‘And, luckily, you are free now. You have done with all business and lawyers at last.’

‘Yes; at least, nothing lies over that such a strong-minded woman as yourself will not be perfectly able to see to, if you will be so good.’

‘I shall be most glad, if I know how,’ she

rejoined ; but she did not feel strong-minded at all as she spoke.

When Glen's intention got wind, everybody thought that, since he must go, he ought to take his wife with him. Nevertheless the laird presumed to know his own affairs best, and he gave not a hint to Christian of any desire for her company. His mother wondered, but held her peace. Christian's sisters also wondered, and they went so far as to ask the reason.

'Glen goes on duty, not for pleasure,' they were answered.

'And you are only to share his pleasures, not his duties,' said Ursula. 'That is scarcely fair ; is it, dear ?'

'Well, well,' observed Miss Elvester, 'I daresay the lady in Mexico will, all things considered, be better pleased to see her nephew without his wife.'

And Christian felt thankful for the timely suggestion.

'It must be relieving to get a husband away for a while,' said Ulrica ; 'you will feel so emancipated, Christian. Glen is quite

agreeable, of course ; still, to have him with you always—always.'

Miss Elvester laughed.

'I take another view,' said she. 'With me Christian is an object of commiseration meantime—ivy without the oak.'

'I am not of the ivy order of women,' declared Christian. 'My husband says I am strong-minded ; at any rate, an oak is not a necessity of life to me.'

'It goes with the luxuries, does it ?' said Miss Elvester.

'With the accidents,' replied Christian. 'If it had happened to me to remain unmarried, I could have lived perfectly contented so.'

'What a pity you were not permitted to develop your theory of independence,' said Miss Elvester. 'A very fine thing you would have made of it, no doubt.'

Christian might have answered that she had developed it pretty well ; but she kept that to herself, and passed from the subject.

No time was lost by Glen. Very soon the day—the hour—the minute of departure came.

‘Wish me god-speed,’ he said at the last to Christian.

‘I do,’ she answered, giving him her hand.

He pressed it tightly, and held it for a second or two in silence. Then he said,—

‘There’s nothing else, I suppose?’

She did not raise her blue eyes, for they were ready to overflow; and she did not answer, for her voice would have failed her; and she did not throw her arms about his neck as she longed to do, for—though he might kiss her now if he chose, and she would not gainsay him—she could not—she *could* not be the first. He, however, did not see the tears, nor guess the longing; and he had made a vow which he was grimly determined to stand to.

‘Very well,’ he said; ‘just as you please about it; good-bye, Christian.’

‘Good-bye, Glen.’

And so they parted—as friends.

After her ‘emancipation’ Christian entered with what zest she could into the pleasant bustle now going on at The Brae; and she still continued to rank in the estimation of Mr

Fyfe Armstrong, to whom she was sitting for her portrait, as one of the punniest of women. But for all that, her heart was not in Laighbield. Weeks multiplied, and Christian arrived in Netherlaw with the November fogs. And Argyll Gardens with Glen's mother was, she found, far homelier than Baronshaugh without Glen. She was made much of here; and the company of Mrs Cassillis rested and strengthened her.

Strange to say, she spent four entire weeks in Netherlaw, before she saw either of the Urquharts. Mr Fyfe Armstrong had some time since offered to withdraw proceedings, if Mr Urquhart would unsay those slanders and make an ample apology for the same. This the defendant had been very loth to do; but there being no easier way out of the dilemma, the slanders had been unsaid and the apology penned, and the town furnished with the most delicious tit-bit of drawing-room gossip of the season. So Dugald, disappointed in love, and smarting under the mortification of having had to apologise to a creature so contemptible as 'Fyfe Armstrong

the artist,' had not of late been wasting himself on Netherlaw. But we know what suffering and wrong are to the poet-soul; and it was being whispered about, that the world was more than likely soon to be a volume the richer for the cruel buffets which the forceful Fates had been dealing to Dugald Urquhart. So, for the brother. As for Moncrieff, rumour did not say how she was employing herself, or guess what wonder was inducing her to be a keeper-at-home.

To compensate, as it seemed, for the want of the Urquharts, Christian had a double doze of Mrs Sledgehammer measured out to her. Neither her marriage nor the loss of her son had wrought any appreciable change in Aunt Euphemia. She had as much to say as ever, and she chose to say a great deal of it to her successor at Baronshaugh (her husband's daughters and she were scarcely on speaking terms). Not only that, but she would carry Glen's wife with her to stirring polemical meetings in the Town-hall, and once even to the strangers' gallery in her church's Presbytery-house. So Christian was witness of

some notable affrays ; while Aunt Euphemia by her side nodded approval towards one bulky form in the thick of the conflict, and ejaculated under breath,—

‘Well put, Dr Doig Sledgehammer!’

Why did she go to these meetings? Mrs Brackenburn asked her once. Did she think by such a course of penance to lay up a stock of superlative merit for herself? But Christian disclaimed the supererogation idea altogether.

‘I go,’ she said, ‘because it seems to please Mrs Sledgehammer ; and it does no harm to me.’

It was in a like spirit that she agreed unmurmuringly to be present at a tea-gathering in the house of Dr Doig Sledgehammer on Christmas Eve. Aunt Euphemia’s invitations were like those of Majesty—commands.

‘It has always been Dr Sledgehammer’s custom to entertain the students over whom he is professor, one evening annually,’ she announced. ‘I have set apart the evening of the twenty-fourth for that purpose, and

I look for you to join us. There is never any of that questionable frivolity at Tower Terrace which unhappily passes for pleasure with so many of the young. You shall spend a rational and improving evening, and one which you will be able afterwards to look back on without shame.'

Shame not being a feeling with which Christian was accustomed to look back on her evenings, the closing assurance was not so great an inducement after all. However, she thanked Mrs Sledgehammer and promised to attend. Hours at Tower Terrace were early, and it was rather past the specified time when Christian joined the tea-party. The drawing-room arrangements seemed to have been made with a view to obviate frivolity: the students sat on this side, the ladies sat on that, and Dr Doig Sledgehammer loomed large between. At a little table overlooking all, presided the hostess, with uncompromising brow; she meant every youthful levite there to feel that her eye was upon him. As Christian glanced along the line, she thought, 'This isn't amusing for

them ; they are all wishing themselves anywhere else, poor boys.'

'Twenty minutes late!' came the tones of Mrs Sledgehammer, gratingly breaking upon the compassion of young Mrs Cassillis. 'There is nothing which has a more generally demoralising effect than unpunctuality.'

'But you will pardon me this once, won't you?' said Christian. 'Willie is having a Christmas tree, and I was wanted to help with receiving the party.'

'A Christmas tree!' echoed Mrs Sledgehammer; 'a Christmas tree! What, pray, is a Christmas tree?' and she fastened an unwinking gaze on the sprig of mistletoe which nestled amid Christian's brown locks.

It gives you an uncomfortable sensation when your interlocutor, instead of looking you in the face, selects an ornament in your hair to make a target of. Something like a guilty feeling crept over Christian. Aunt Euphemia evidently regarded it as a weakness verging on immorality to wear mistletoe in the hair, and suppose, only suppose, she should be moved to make that the text of a

harangue before all these people. Happily, her spirit was touched to other issues.

‘Christmas trees,’ she said, answering her own question, ‘are among the little foxes that spoil the grapes. Christmas observance ought to have no place in the country of Knox and Melville ; but, as I often say, the degenerate modern spirit of liberality so called, is to re-introduce in full phalanx the very mummeries which the zeal of our righteous forefathers swept from the land.’

Here some empty cups brought Mrs Sledgehammer down to the trivial round of replenishing them ; so Christian was free to fall into the ranks. Just as young Mrs Cassillis had found a niche for herself among the ladies, an unexpected voice hailed her by name.

‘Christina, don’t you see *me* ?’

And she looked along the row to have her eyes refreshed with a vision of Miss Urquhart, in a glow of pale amber satin, established between a stout and blooming maiden in azure, and a fair citizeness in cardinal velvet. To the first Moncrieff made her appeal.

‘*Would* you mind changing places with my cousin, Miss Macculloch? Oh, thanks; so kind! Now, Christina, come beside me; I have an immensity of things to talk about.’

So Christian exchanged seats with the lady in blue, and pronounced herself ready to attend to Moncrieff’s ‘immensity.’ The first thing Moncrieff mentioned was the flatness of the present hour.

‘Aunt Euphemia calls this improving,’ drawled the much bored one, in her sleepest of undertones, ‘but *I* call it dry. And fancy having such awkward creatures looking at you! Students do well enough in torch-light procession, or in the gallery at opera, but who wants to mix oneself up with them in the drawing-room?’

‘I do,’ said Christian. ‘I only wait till Mrs Sledgehammer can be got to introduce me. I like the look of some of them very much.’

‘You don’t,’ replied Moncrieff. ‘Oh dear, I wish I weren’t here!’

‘That is past praying for,’ said Christian.

‘But you knew what you were coming to. Why did you come?’

‘To-morrow week is New Year,’ explained Moncrieff, behind her fan, ‘and Aunt Euphemia has promised to give me then a small diamond-rose which was once my mother’s. But I couldn’t wait till New Year, that’s why I came. I wanted my rose now—and I’ve got it too.’

‘Then, can’t you be happy thinking of it?’

‘Yes, if I could think of it somewhere else than here,’ murmured Moncrieff. ‘But *don’t* be introduced, Christina. You might have to appear as a witness. I’m going back with you to Aunt Marjorie’s, and if you had encouraged the students, a few might take a fancy to follow us, and then to have a snow-ball riot all along Argyll Gardens. That’s what they do whenever they get a chance, and get taken up by the police afterwards, and everybody else has to appear as witnesses.’

‘There will be no snow left for rioting with, Moncrieff—nothing but slush. It rains hard to-night.’

‘How very provoking! for it will be too odi-

ously aggravating if it rain to-morrow when I am going to—service at St Timothy's.'

The unusualness of Moncrieff's attending service any oftener than conventionality demanded, and the peculiar pause in the last sentence, struck Christian.

'I should have thought you would prefer St Anselm's; they have full choral service there,' she said.

'All services are alike to me,' confessed Moncrieff, 'except High Mass, which is more lively, especially at Rome. Only, at St Peter's you have to wear black, that you mayn't put out the Pope and Cardinals. When Dugald told me I must go in black, I knew what was meant by the Papal tyranny that Dr Doig Sledgehammer preaches about. Black is so hatefully dismal. I detest it. Don't you?'

The dress of the person spoken to was of the detested colour, but the speaker never thought of that, not even when in answer to the 'Don't you?' Christian's lace flounces were shaken out suggestively. Moncrieff would not have been Moncrieff if she had

not sought to alleviate the ills of her situation by manifold wishing, so she wished that, the diamond-rose notwithstanding, she had not come ; that she might soon be gone ; that she should never need again to be at one of Mrs Sledgehammer's rational and improving tea-parties ; and so on, till Christian was caught away to be made useful at the piano. Then her self-pity became even more intense. She refused to suffer any of the gentlemen to be made known to her ; she looked askance at the ladies as being ' such poky people ; ' she endured in a die-away manner, and answered with monosyllables, the remarks which Dr Doig Sledgehammer, in making a conversational tour of the room, doled out to her. Time stood still withal. Each successive minute seemed to spin itself out farther than the one before, and Moncrieff felt verily assured that this was indeed the most wearisome evening, by a long way, that she had ever languished through. About nine o'clock her power of endurance failed. She was seized with tic-douloureux, and, Aunt Euphemia excusing her, she must go. Mrs

Sledgehammer looked suspicious, but never a word said she. Dr Sledgehammer thought it a pity any one should leave before the evening Exercise and Exegesis. But at mention of that, the tic-douloureux became so much more agonising that, right or wrong, Moncrieff had to be permitted to withdraw.

Christian, who had been amusing herself very well among the students, in a few minutes followed Moncrieff to the cloaking-room.

‘Get ready quick!’ said Moncrieff. ‘I’ve sent for a cab, and—’

The door opened. Mrs Sledgehammer strode straight into the middle of the sentence, preventing the end of it from being heard, and drew up ominously.

Moncrieff hastily muffled her head and shoulders in a woollen shawl. But before attending to her, Aunt Euphemia had a word to say to Christian. Ursula was to be married in church; and this was the subject for a tirade, commencing, ‘Is marriage a sacrament, then?’ and going on to throw all manner of scorn on Presby-

terianism turning aside to Prelacy, which is the high road to Rome.

Christian listened in awed silence, and considered what a power in the pulpit Mrs Sledgehammer might be, if once the day of the full acknowledgment of woman's-rights were come.

Moncrieff did not listen ; she hated to hear such slow stuff, and stopped her ears with the fringe of her muffler.

'Are you in acute pain ?' demanded Aunt Euphemia, suddenly turning to her from Christian.

'I only wish you felt it !' moaned Moncrieff from the depths of her wrapping.

'If you have toothache, you don't leave this house to-night,' said Mrs Sledgehammer decisively.

'As if *I* ever had toothache !' exclaimed Moncrieff. 'How disgusting !' (And in her disgust she spoke much less faintly than last time.) 'But I can't stay, thanks ; my things have gone on to Aunt Marjorie's.'

'You can have them brought back again ; nothing simpler.'

‘But the cab is at the door; I hear it now. I must go indeed, Aunt Euphemia.’

‘Not one yard. If you were too ill to remain in the drawing-room during Dr Sledgehammer’s Exegesis of Scripture, you can be in no state to expose yourself in a cab. I countermanded your order; so the cab at the door is not for you.’

‘You have no right to keep me—has she, Christina? And I won’t stay; I must see dear Aunt Marjorie!’

(Affectionate Moncrieff!)

‘Take your things off,’ said Aunt Euphemia coolly. ‘You shall go to bed, and have hot water and pepper to drink—a very good remedy for toothache.’

‘Oh, horrid!’ gasped Moncrieff.

‘I have to request that you will not make use of such expressions under *this* roof, my dear.’

‘But it *is* ho—’

‘Not *one* word more, Moncrieff; not *one* word more. I am going to give instructions about a room for you, so you may make an end.’

And Moncrieff did make an end. Her aunt having disappeared along a side passage, she darted forth, and down, and through the entrance-hall, and out.

‘Argyll Gardens!’ she cried, as she threw herself into the waiting cab.

The driver was puzzled.

‘The lady was for Eastvale, as I was told,’ said he.

‘But she has changed her mind,’ replied Moncrieff, becoming inventive, as usual, in her extremity. ‘And the fare will be the same.’

That was a happy thought about the fare. Without more ado, the man mounted and drove off; and the Eastvale lady, the real hirer of the cab, was left to providence.





CHAPTER XI.

A MIDNIGHT INTRUDER.

‘ Suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping,
Rapping at my chamber door.’

WHEN the twelve strokes of midnight ushered Christmas in, Christian was comfortably settled in her own sitting-room at Argyll Gardens, letter-reading. The apartments she had now were not those she had occupied before her marriage, but those which had at that time been Glen's; and as they had been used by him, so they still stood; for Christian, liking to have her husband's books, pictures, miscellanea, all about her, would have nothing changed.

Among the letters which young Mrs Cassillis had before her was one from the lady whom Glen had gone to befriend. Aunt Nannie had written a good many pages, telling what her nephew had done for her, and expressing the regret she felt at being the unfortunate cause of separating him from a wife who must miss him, and whom he must be missing so sadly ; pages which would not be in the least interesting even to my most long-suffering reader, but which were quite absorbingly so to Christian.

There was also a letter from Glen himself—a notelet, rather ; for it was so severely to the point that it might have been written on Aunt Euphemia's favourite medium of communication, a post-card. Circumstances unnecessary to detail had occasioned the postponement of departure for a week. The new date of sailing was announced, and the belief expressed that, even leaving then, the writer would be home in time for the marriage at Laighbield. That, with the usual courtesies, was all. And as this was, so had been Glen's correspondence throughout.

Not much for a wife to console herself with during a husband's absence ; but Christian could hardly grumble, seeing she knew that she had only herself to thank. One small token of regard accompanied the letter ; Glen had enclosed a photograph of himself. Christian scrutinised it earnestly and long, as if she would read in the face all that the letter did not say. But it was not to be done ; she could only see that Glen looked a trifle impatient, as if he had been submitting himself to the photographer under protest, which indeed was most probably the case, and that he had adopted a new mode of wearing his necktie.

The dark face which those blue eyes gazed at so wistfully was not handsome ; in that respect it could never be compared to the face of a Donald Berwick or a Dugald Urquhart ; but beside it the most perfect type of manly beauty in the world would have been nothing to Christian. Merely looking at the photograph did not satisfy her ; before she could lay it by, she stooped over the unresponsive bit of cardboard and pressed her lips to it,

her cheeks, the while, taking a deeper tinge. Yet it might have been well to have made sure of her privacy before indulging in this secret tender idolatry, for at that moment, and after the very, very lightest preliminary tap, the door opened to admit a beauteous vision in picturesque undress. To do Moncrieff justice, she had expected the door to be fastened within, and had but moved the handle to attract attention. When the door opened, however, she was not obliged to close it on herself again; what remained for a person in such a case but to pass through? And she would no doubt have explained this, but seeing how Christian was engaged, the necessity for an apology escaped her, and she exclaimed,—

‘Kissing a carte-de-visite! I never did such a thing in my life! Who is he?’

‘Only my husband,’ replied Christian; and her tone was very much cooler than her countenance.

Moncrieff did not ask to see the photograph, nor yet to hear anything about her cousin’s movements. Why should she?

At one time she had taken as much interest in Glen as it was possible for her to take in anybody ; but that was past now.

‘ You are so very comfortable here,’ she said, laying herself along one of those invitations to lounging and sloth, which always roused Aunt Euphemia to a new protest against the sinful luxury of the nineteenth century. ‘ But Aunt Marjorie has huddled me into a place no bigger than a mousehole.’

‘ But you weren’t expected,’ represented Christian, ‘ and the house is full, and there wasn’t time to build an addition.’

‘ I might have had better if people had chosen.’

‘ I might have taken the mousehole and given you this, do you mean? But you left me at Tower Terrace, and when I got back they told me you were in bed, so how could I?’

‘ But I wasn’t in bed. I stayed up on purpose to have a chat with you.’

‘ About the smallness of your room? Oh, please, wouldn’t it wait till morning?’

It was not the room, however ; it was to talk over that most cleverly-effected

escape of hers from the house of Dr Doig Sledgehammer.

‘Now, woe betide you!’ said Christian, when interrogated, ‘for Aunt Euphemia will be here herself to-morrow, to tell you all about it. I shouldn’t care to be in your place then, Moncrieff.’

Moncrieff smiled to her reflection in an opposite mirror, as if they shared between them, she and it, the enjoyment of some exquisitely flavoured morsel of drollery.

‘I shall not mind—I shall not mind—I shall not mind,’ she hummed.

Christian, who had been putting away her letters, did not sit down again; that would seem to acquiesce in an indefinite extension of the interview. She remained standing before the writing-table, looking with a sort of provoked amusement on the fine figure stretched at luxurious length among the velvet cushions.

‘Why did you choose tic-douloureux to be ill with?’ she asked.

‘I did feel dolorous,’ Moncrieff replied; and it was a very safe little bit of a fib, just

to put "tic" before it. You tell white fibs yourself, Christina—of course, you do—and Glen—and everybody.'

'Those "safe" untruths are the very meanest of all,' said Christian, rather warmly. 'It's less cowardly to tell a downright falsehood, and brave the consequences, than to say something that we expect to have all the advantage to us of a falsehood, without the punishment of one.'

'Well, I don't think it is very nice of you to tell falsehoods,' said virtuous Moncrieff.

'I don't say I tell falsehoods; I only say, that of the two, the bold ones are, to me, the less disgraceful.'

This sounded prosy to Moncrieff, who therefore hastened to be quit of the subject.

'You are a second Aunt Euphemia,' she remarked; 'she is always thinking a variety of things disgraceful: it must be something in the air of Baronshaugh, I believe. Maryanne Kirkpatrick calls you "the little Puritan," don't you know?—so spiteful isn't it? (But it's *true*!) And Maryanne wonders

whether Glen means ever to come home to you again.'

'You can put an end to her kind anxiety, if you like. I expect Glen is on his way home now.'

'Is he, indeed! One does hope he will get across all right; but when I hear the wind blow high, I shall think of castaways, and wrecks, and ships on fire. A raft would be a most inconvenient place to die on, wouldn't it? I should hate for myself above everything to lie like the dead girl that Dugald gave a penny-reading about to the colliers at Craigie Urquhart last week—(I had to go to countenance it, but it *was* stupid)—who floated along a stream to a castle called Camelot.'

'You didn't see any sense in the poem? supposed Christian.'

'Oh, I didn't listen; somebody told me after about the dead girl on the raft. Why do people ever write poetry? It's so dreadfully tedious to have it read to you. Dugald says, if one doesn't like poetry, it shows a want of mind; but I would rather be without

a mind, if having one would make me so much of a fogey as Dugald is ; so—what was it you called him once, Christina ?—so monotonous. He was in high anger when I told him that ; he said that though you were so absurdly conceited, you were quite unqualified to judge a person like him. Isn't he nasty when he's angry, don't you think ?'

' But it was not I who called him monotonous,' corrected Christian ; ' it was yourself.'

' It's all the same,' rejoined Moncrieff, ' as if people could remember who exactly says everything they hear !'

As this midnight intruder went thus skipping from one mountain peak of nonsense to another, her notice happened to fall on some Christmas cards which, taking time by the forelock, had reached Christian on Christmas Eve. They were on the writing-table, and a slight change in the relative positions of Christian and Moncrieff revealed them to the latter, who for some reason or other took the trouble of rising and crossing the room to look at them more closely. After having turned them carelessly over,

and related how many she herself had received on past occasions, and from whom, and how ravishingly beautiful they all had been, she put her hand on a desk which lay by, saying,—

‘This is cousin Glen’s. What does he keep in it?’

‘Nothing,’ replied Christian; ‘he left it to be used by me.’

‘What has he in the secret-drawer?—for, of course, you’ve looked there.’

‘I haven’t. I didn’t know there was a secret-drawer.’

‘How slow of you! Of course, there is a secret-drawer. I opened it once long ago, when I was staying here: there were love-letters in it from the girl Glen was soon to have married, if she hadn’t died. That was when *I* was quite a child, of course. This is the spring. See; you push it so.’

At the accompanying pressure of her finger, a panel fell down, and the drawer stood open to view.

‘Don’t, don’t! We have no right,’ interposed Christian, as Moncrieff immediately

seized upon the only articles the recess contained—a bunch of withered flowers and a solitary letter.

Moncrieff paid no attention.

‘Mine!’ she exclaimed; ‘and how very funny to have hoarded it up here! Glen was always such an absurd character.’

It was something else than absurd, Glen’s wife thought, with a pang; she did not see, for her part, why Glen need have treasured his cousin’s love-gift so faithfully.

Heedless Moncrieff had no sooner taken the flowers than she let them drop from her fingers to the floor. Christian stooped to pick them up; these and the slip of paper which had been wrapped round their stalks, and which Moncrieff had unrolled. There was writing on the paper: a date and two words. But those words made all the difference in the world to her who read them; for they were the words, ‘From Christian.’ The flowers were *her* love-gift, then; those which Glen had begged from her one well-remembered happy afternoon. It was a surprise, and her voice thrilled as she said,—

‘Those violets were never yours, Moncrieff.’

‘I should think not, indeed,’ laughed Moncrieff contemptuously ;—‘the musty, disagreeable old plants. It is this letter that is mine.’

‘Not now. If you sent it to Glen, it is his. Do put it back, won’t you? as I shall the violets. We ought not to have opened the drawer; we haven’t any right to touch Glen’s things.’

Moncrieff was no logician to prove her own way the disputed point; her line was to hold staunchly by the good old serviceable maxim, that might is right. So she answered this appeal to her honour, by tossing the letter into the fire. Christian sprang forward, and, at the cost of a scorched hand, effected the rescue.

Frustration of her purpose drew a strain of minor music from Moncrieff.

‘What did Glen mean by keeping it?’ she complained. ‘I wish I had never written it at all. He might make such trouble with it, and I daresay he will; for he was always so particularly disagreeable, when he fancied I

cared for any one. And it wasn't meant for him any way. It was poor, dear cousin Quentin's fault. He wanted to play me a trick on the first of April. That's how it was. I went to the post-office as soon as I found out; but the man there is an idiot, and I couldn't get it returned. And though he is dead now, I *will* say it was most unpleasant of him, and most provoking. If I hadn't sent it, you would never have been married, Christina; he could not deny it, if you were to ask him; and that is why he bullied me into swearing never to say more to you about it, when I went to stay with you at Barons-haugh. And I never have, you know.'

As she listened to Moncrieff's jumble of pronouns, Christian was kneeling on the rug, holding her burnt hand over the fire, in order that the greater heat might draw out the less. From the last extraordinary effort at English she gathered that the letter she had just snatched from destruction was that very misdirected communication, which, according to its writer's former showing, had betrayed to Glen the relations in which his

cousins Quentin and Moncrieff stood to each other; and she wondered why her husband had preserved it,—why Moncrieff should now be so anxious to make away with it,—and so on, similarly. But Moncrieff was hardly the person to whom to apply for information; to Moncrieff she only said suggestively,—

‘It gets very late, does it not? Think of the morning.’

‘What matter about lateness and the morning?’ rejoined Moncrieff. ‘I shall have breakfast in bed.’

‘But I shall not,’ said Christian; ‘so don’t you see, it matters a little to me.’

Moncrieff did not see anything of the kind; her vision was always strictly bounded by her own personal horizon.

‘What are you going to do with my letter?’ she asked.

‘To give it back to Glen; and not to read it until I have his leave,’ said Christian.

Moncrieff came and wound her arms round Christian’s neck.

‘I’ll take care of it for you,’ she whispered, beguilingly.

‘Believe me grateful,’ was the reply; ‘but I’ve a feeling that I would rather take care of it myself.’

‘Only let me see it then, Christina. I have forgotten half I wrote; I have, indeed; and I want to see if there *is* anything that Glen, if he chose to be so spiteful, could make mischief with.’

‘I’ll answer for Glen that he will be no mischief-maker; but I won’t trust you with the letter; since your cousin prizes it so highly, he shall have it safely back.’

‘Unamiable thing!’ pouted Moncrieff, withdrawing her embrace. ‘So shockingly unpleasant!—a miserable, half-burned old letter!’

‘But it isn’t only the burnt letter that makes me unamiable; there is this burnt hand as well; so try to excuse me. And believe what I say about Glen. He get any girl into mischief! why, even if he could get you into trouble, he would rather get into trouble himself in order to shield you; I am very sure of that.’

‘Then you needn’t be, for nobody can ever

be very sure of anything, except that everybody will always be as disagreeable as they can.'

Soon after making this doleful summary of matters here below, Moncrieff showed symptoms of a disposition to retire. Her going was an affair of pauses and degrees, however; but, scattering parting pearls from her lips as she went—among others the thrice-repeated wish that the rainfall should have ceased before the hour of service at St Timothy's—she did at last gradually get herself away; and Christian was left with her own thoughts, the bunch of withered violets, and the letter.





CHAPTER XII.

EXIT MISS URQUHART.

‘They sought her baith by bower and ha’;
The ladye was not seen!’



CONFORMABLY to Moncrieff's desires, it did not rain on Christmas Day. Instead, a greenish-yellow fog crept over Netherlaw, wrapping it up as if in a wet blanket, while the rich oily mud peculiar to that flourishing town made the public ways uninviting in the extreme to foot-passengers. Moncrieff, for her part, had no intention of being a foot-passenger. On appearing in the breakfast-room, but some time after breakfast, she mentioned to her aunt that she had need of the carriage; she was anxious to attend service at St Timothy's.

As it happened, Christian with Ulrica, who was also a visitor, and two other girl-guests, were just going out. The carriage, Mrs Cassillis explained, could not be at Moncrieff's disposal. On hearing this, Moncrieff's countenance so mightily fell that Christian's heart smote her. Life was feeling pleasant to Christian to-day; Christian could not bear to see any one else vexed, so she said,—

‘Religion before pleasure, mother dear. Moncrieff wants to go to church. As for us, we can have the carriage later in the day.’

This was all very well, but as soon as Christian quitted the room, Aunt Marjorie said,—

‘You really must not accustom yourself to expect all the world to give way to you, Moncrieff. I happen to know that it will suit Christian best to go out in the forenoon, though she makes light of her convenience, that you may follow yours. And the others, too, would be disappointed by any alteration of plan. If you are anxious to attend Christmas service, we must send for a cab; for indeed, my dear, the carriage is out of the question.’

‘Oh, but I do quite detest these common street cabs,’ objected Moncrieff. ‘One so hates to be driven by a shabby, red-nosed man and a horse-scarecrow. It isn’t respectable.’

‘I daresay we shall secure something for you not quite so dreadful as you picture,’ said her aunt, pleasantly. ‘At any rate, one has sometimes to bend to circumstances, you know.’

But Moncrieff’s theory was, that circumstances ought always bend to her; she accordingly filled the time that remained before starting in bemoaning the miserable necessity which would send her abroad—not under cover of darkness, as last night, but beneath the wide-open eye of day—in one of those most un-presentable of vehicles, a Netherlaw street cab. Nevertheless the conveyance which in due season appeared, proved much less of an eyesore than she could have supposed; the fog, too, by throwing a merciful veil over her ignominy, would stand her in good stead. So, considering these ameliorations in her lot, she took heart a little, and was even able

to extend a half-forgiveness to those who had wronged her. She allowed Christian to lend her some furs, and graciously accepted a box of French confections from Ulrica, to whom they had been sent by an admirer, the rising young advocate, Mrs Brackenburn's cousin Jack. It was a self-denying effort on Ulrica's part to bestow her Christmas-box upon Moncrieff. She wanted to enjoy the sweets herself, but she still more wanted to be generous; and that virtue would, she considered, be best attained by giving away the whole of what she had received, and by giving it to a person who would never thank her—a person, too, for whom she could not entertain the very least regard.

But I call Moncrieff's a half-forgiveness, because, though she kindly permitted these attentions, she retained so much of her resentment as to reply, when asked if she would make one of the next evening's party for the pantomime,—

‘Not I, thank you. I'm not coming back. You might wish me to go to the pantomime in a cab.’

‘We shall have some Shetland people at dinner to-night,’ said Mrs Cassillis; ‘won’t we have you as well?’

‘Oh no, thank you. I shouldn’t like it at all. Shetlanders aren’t much more than half-civilised, are they, Aunt Marjorie?’

‘As witness my daughter Christian,’ responded Aunt Marjorie, with a smile.

‘Do you think we drink from our finger-glasses, and eat with our knives?’ chimed in Ulrica, drawing herself up.

‘Moncrieff is only talking nonsense, darling,’ said Mrs Cassillis, patting the child’s flushed cheek.

At the same time Christian, who was at the window, turned round, with the warning,—

‘Fly, Moncreiff, fly! I see Aunt Euphemia coming out of the mist. You’ve not one instant to lose.’

Moncrieff needed no second advice. With the utmost precipitation she fled to the shelter of the despised cab, and so a second time made good her escape from Mrs Sledgehammer. But those whom she left behind, as they watched her being whirled off, did

not know that they were having their last sight of Miss Urquhart.

Moncrieff did not drive to St Timothy's, as it subsequently transpired, but to the fashionable luncheon-rooms of Price & Platterfill. Arrived there, she dismissed her cab, and afterwards—yes, that was just the rub—what did she do? where did she go afterwards? These were questions which, often as they came to be asked, there was nobody found to settle. She did not return to Argyll Gardens; nor yet did she go home to Craigie Urquhart; neither could she be found in Netherlaw, though by day and night they searched high and low for her.

Dugald, who might have been supposed to know if his sister had any motive for disappearing from the sight of men, was in total darkness concerning her; she might have had strong reasons, or might have had none at all, for aught that he could say. *His* conscience was clear; but he laid the blame of neglect of duty on Moncrieff's maid, on his aunts, on his cousin's wife even. They ought to have taken care of her—*they*! For

how should he, a man, and a man with weighty matters pressing on his mind, have constituted himself the girl's warder? If Moncrieff required watching, the women should have known it was so, and have looked to it. For what had happened, therefore, they, and they alone, were the parties responsible.


As may be guessed, Mrs Sledgehammer would not lie under the imputation—no, not for an hour! She soon made it abundantly clear that on her part there had been no failure in duty towards Moncrieff. Mrs Cassillis, on the contrary, knowing that Dugald, by a necessity of his nature, must in any crisis find relief for himself through the tongue, let him argue his loudest without contradicting him. Unfortunately, argument did not forward the recovery of the missing Moncrieff. Day followed day, and why she had gone and whence, remained a mystery. Speculations—evil surmisings—vain rumours filled the air, till the much-harassed Dugald bitterly complained that the honourable name of Urquhart was become a by-word in the mouth of every vulgar scandal-monger in the kingdom.



CHAPTER XIII.

H Y M E N E A L.

‘That she should love this fellow, and refuse me !’

HE ninth day of wonder at Moncrieff's disappearance was the day of Ursula's marriage ; and in spite of Mrs Sledgehammer's disapproval of such a dangerous innovation, the ceremony was performed by Dr Brackenburn in Laighbiel Parish Kirk. But what can a novelist say about a marriage that has not been said ten thousand times before ? Be kind enough, then, to imagine for yourself the millinery of the party ; how the bridegroom bore himself as he waited in front of the pulpit during the trying moments preceding the bride's arrival ; with what grace the white-veiled Ursula

came through the aisle ; how impressively Dr Brackenburn performed his part ; how satisfactorily Ulrica managed hers. Fill up and colour to taste, and you have the church scene. Farther than the church, however, you cannot be left to your own guidance, else you would go on to fancy a wedding-breakfast party ; whereas wedding-breakfast party there was none. The stereotyped laudatory speeches lavished on people at marriage as at death, were spared, and all other like auxiliaries dispensed with ; and though Laighbiel was thrown into a tumult of interjections at the sight of its laird's sister-in-law being married with so much less display than would have been thought indispensable to the nuptials of any bonnet-knitter, nobody was a whit the worse.

Some time after all who had been at church had gone their several ways, Christian proceeded to The Brae to say good-bye to the bride. She found her sisters side by side on the sofa in the little parlour. Salutations had been exchanged between her and them in church, but nothing more ; and now there

was the question which had generally been first of late,—

‘Nothing yet of Moncrieff Urquhart?’

‘Not an idea,’ said Christian.

‘Nor of Glen?’ asked Ulrica, as she gave up her place to the new-comer and descended to a Persian mat in front.

The marriage had been postponed on account of the absent brother-in-law, and after all he had not come.’

‘No, nor of Glen,’ murmured Christian lugubriously.

‘Shame on him!’ said Ulrica in parenthesis.

‘My dearest child, don’t be nonsensical!’ cried Miss Elvester. ‘Your husband will be with you in the course of a day or two; never fear it.’

‘I hope so; and I try to think that I am nonsensical. But, Jenny, pity me! I kept awake all through Sunday night listening to the gale, and I read afterwards the list of disasters at sea; and the steamer is already some days overdue, so how can I but be nervous?’

They at once set about reassuring her. Ursula by dwelling on the fact that no serious accident had ever happened to any ship of the line to which Glen's vessel belonged; Miss Elvester, by asking her to think how often at certain seasons the Shetland boat was delayed a day or two over time, and bidding her remember how, when Mr Rich of Bresta went south to be married, he was kept a prisoner on board till the wedding-day was past, to his own much vexation, and the no small inconvenience of the waiting bride.

These statements must be admitted. But yet, if Jenny or Ursula had a husband in a delayed vessel, would not she, too, give way to anxiety, even in the teeth of experience and philosophy? This, however, was digressional. Christian had not come to speak of her personal concerns. The object of interest to-day was Ursula. Princess Ursula had taken her marriage very quietly, and there was so little of anything like excitement in her manner, that Ulrica felt constrained to protest.

‘Never, never was there such an unemotional creature,’ said she. ‘She will not be stirred into an ardour. Why is it, Jenny?’

‘A mere matter of temperament,’ replied Miss Elvester.

‘Was it temperament that made her write her signature to-day, as if she were setting me a copy? When Christian signed *her* marriage certificate her hand wavered all up and down the paper.’

‘Only temperament. I haven’t a doubt that the one felt as much as the other, all the while.’

‘Wise little child,’ said Christian, stroking Ulrica’s hair; ‘you will be sure to hit the happy medium when your turn comes.’

‘I will never marry,’ rejoined Ulrica.

‘Would it interfere too much with the interests of art?’

‘You need not quiz me, Christian. But I shall tell you why: it would not suit my character. I couldn’t bear that any man should have a right to say “You must,” or “You must not,” to me. When I have

grown out of Jenny's authority I will endure no other.'

'But it isn't so bad as you might imagine,' said Christian. 'Ursula will tell you that the dread of it has not made her at all unhappy.'

'And you have only to look at Christian to see that the sooner the man who has a right to say "You must," or "You must not," to her is back to say it, the better pleased she will be,' observed Miss Elvester. 'Time is up, I see,' she added, glancing at her watch; 'and may I without offence whisper in her brideship's ear, that it would be advisable not to inaugurate her new career by trying a husband's patience too far?'

So reminded, Ursula made herself ready for the road, while Ulrica went to tell Mr Berwick that he was free to take his wife and begone.

'I am grieved to leave you, Jenny,' said Ursula, as she stood prepared; 'I know I shall never find a better home.'

'Never a better home than a hut in an odious country town!' ejaculated Miss

Elvester, with uplifted eyebrows. 'You are talking at random, surely.'

'Dear Jenny, forgive me ! I was bitter and shamefully selfish when I said that ; and I hated the lessons which I so much needed to learn. You told me I should one day beg your pardon, and I do.'

Of course the apology was accepted. Immediately thereafter the bridegroom appeared, with Ulrica on his arm, and there was a general movement to the door. Ulrica remained a moment behind the others, to place Slyboots where he might conveniently witness the departure. He was decorated with a wedding-favour, he had eaten a piece of bridecake with great satisfaction, and it was only right that, to finish up, he should have a proper vantage-ground from which to wave his adieux. So his mistress laid a cushion for him among the myrtles and geraniums at the window, and recommended him to 'keep his weather eye open.' But, looking back soon afterwards, Ulrica perceived that, regardless of his high privileges, Slyboots had made a com-

fortable coil of himself and gone to sleep. He had no sentiment in him, the soft, furry ball!

‘Everything has come right now,’ said Ulrica musingly, when the carriage containing the bride and bridegroom was lost to sight; ‘everything but one. To make our fortunes complete, to give a good ending to them, we ought to get back our darling Eastravoe.’

‘Ah, but how?’ said Christian, sighing; ‘such endings are only for the story books, dear. Did you know, Jenny, that Eastravoe has been sold at last, furniture and all, just as it stands? Who can have bought it, I wonder?’

‘I heard of the sale, but not the name of the buyer,’ said Miss Elvester. ‘It must be some speculator, I imagine, who hopes to let it furnished for the summer months.’

Tears were in Christian’s eyes.

‘It makes our loss seem quite fresh,’ she said; ‘I can’t bear to think of—’

‘Excuse me,’ interrupted Miss Elvester, ‘but you only want an excuse for crying, and I am not going to encourage it; and you

must not think me hard-hearted if I say that the loss of Eastravoe was the best thing that could have happened to us. It has taught us what we might not otherwise have learnt—something of our own proper relation to the universe ; so, my foolish Christian, content you. And you, my dear Ulrica, must make up your mind that Eastravoe is of the past ; that for you and me Laighbiel and The Brae must serve.'

'I daresay we shall be very happy, we two,' said Ulrica. 'I shall miss Ursula, but she will miss me more—much more. Very likely she is just now asking Mr Berwick if he remembers who Gildas was, and the names of all the Bretwaldas of the Saxon Heptarchy.'

'He has but to say "You must not," to her,' suggested Christian, making an effort to laugh, though as her sister had said, she only wanted an excuse to cry.

'The probability is,' said Miss Elvester, 'that Donald and Ursula Berwick will content themselves to-day with matters less remote than Gildas and the Heptarchy.'

And probably they would.

But whether Ursula had been talking about Gildas and the Heptarchy or not, all traces of the tears with which the parting from her sisters had bedewed her lashes, were gone by the time she reached Braidmoss. A good many eyes were turned upon her, as the change from carriage to train was being made. And among these were the pair belonging to Dugald Urquhart, for Dugald happened to be pacing the platform when the bride and bridegroom came along. This gentleman had not seen Ursula since their short correspondence in the autumn, and it is not to be supposed that his gentler feelings would be brought into play by now beholding her being borne off by his successful rival. What malicious fate had brought him at such a moment to face the woman who had rejected him, and given her hand to one who, though he had mounted the pulpit, should never have left the plough? It was a moment to be remembered. Dirks and the like gear having gone out of vogue, how ought an individual so circumstanced to act? Would he treat the lady as any other

lady of his acquaintance, and be frigidly civil to the man? Well, the common-place weaklings who crowd the world might do that, but Mr Urquhart was of a different order. He dealt the offensive couple one sweeping glance, then fixed his disgusted gaze on the clock over the entrance, and passed slowly—slowly—on, with his chin on high, and heels that spurned the pavement.

‘The cut direct!’ said the bridegroom to the bride, when they had got themselves comfortably settled. ‘My poor Ursula!’

‘You laugh,—I thought you would be angry,’ remarked Ursula.

‘Angry to-day! And may not I laugh, who have won? Little enough like laughter I used to feel, when I had to stand looking at you from afar, while you were being engrossed by—’

‘Don’t, don’t speak of it!’ she said. ‘But I never guessed you were watching me; and oh, it is true, Donald!—I was as little inclined to laughter as you could be.’

‘It was clever Mrs Brackenburn who must have done the laughing for all,’ he replied;

‘she guessed, if you did not; and—what! blushing about it, my—’ the pet-name was lost in a steam-whistle, excruciating and prolonged, which made Ursula press her hands tightly over her ears.

‘Moral: never make love in a railway-station,’ said the bridegroom, as the train started.





CHAPTER XIV.

IN MOST GRACIOUS FOOLING.

“The time has come,” the Walrus said,
“To speak of many things :
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax ;
Of cabbages—and kings—
And why the sea is boiling hot—
And whether pigs have wings.”’



F Miss Elvester gave no wedding-breakfast to her friends, she gave a wedding-supper to a number of poor children, in whose moral and social well-being she had been taking a practical interest for some time past. The gathering was convoked in the well-sized, ground-floor apartment in the Wynd, rented by Mrs Brackenburn for educational purposes ; and it was presided over by a gentleman greatly in favour of the advance of learning, and one

who, like Magister Erasmus Holiday of respected memory, had a happy knack for conducting a certain species of social entertainments to what he himself described as 'a mosst satisfactory issue.'

Having heard of this faculty, Miss Elvester put matters into the hands of Mr Mungo Mauchline; and he, well-pleased, did his very best to justify her trust. He garlanded the bare white walls with a judicious mixture of evergreens and paper-roses; he collected a small army of naphtha-lamps from obliging housewives, and hung them round; he borrowed a magic-lantern from a Netherlaw friend; and lest amidst so many enchantments time might fleet too carelessly, he brought a painted china-clock from his own parlour mantel-piece, and placed it upon a pedestal where it would not fail to be seen by every eye.

Ursula's bonnet-knitters came tricked out in their Sunday bravery, so losing in picturesqueness more than they gained in style. The children, on the other hand, having no choice of toilet, appeared in out-at-elbow suits,

which had descended from sire to son, or frocks, the original patterns and colours of which was a riddle to be guessed at, but never solved. Hands and faces were tolerably clean, and hair had in most instances received at least an effort at attention. But came they in finery, or came they in tatters; with well-oiled hair, or tangled elf-locks, they were received with equal cordiality by Mr Mungo Mauchline, and planted round ‘this free and jyful bord;’ where, as the *Cornrigshire Chronicler* afterwards informed its public, ‘All did ample justice to the good cheer generously provided by the open-handed lady of The Brae, and purveyed by Mr Adam Grubb, baker, Townend.’

This ample justice having been done, Mr Mungo Mauchline arose and said,—

‘It is now my highest privilege, as it is my bounden duty, to intimate that though our worthy and revered divine, Dr Brackenburn, has left Laighbiel this afternoon, to deliver a lit’rary lecture in Netherlaw, and will be disabilitated from jyning us on this occasion, his honoured lady and the lady of our re-

spected laird have promised to do themselves the pleasure of looking in on this assembly in the course of the evening. And when their amiable ladies arrive, let every one present remain in your respectable places, and show your good manners by rising to your feet suddenly, and greeting them with three sincere rounds of applause. In the meantime I and my kind assistant shall exhibit before you a most superior magic-lantern, with many choice views, and which I will also illustrate with a series of humorous stories.'

Magic-lantern and illustrations were followed by a service of fruit, during which the expected ladies arrived, and were marshalled in grand form by the master of ceremonies to the two chairs of state at the head of the room. Mr Mungo Mauchline had reserved *the* feature of the evening until now, and, the pre-arranged applause having ceased, he took his place, with an air, behind a table which stood under the china clock. It was a kitchen table, but people were not supposed to know that; it was covered with a crimson cloth, and held a carafe and tumbler. And here

Mr Mungo Mauchline was about to exercise the gift of oratory that was in him.

He drew himself up, slowly raised his arms and folded them on his breast, after the most approved method of amateur actors, whose part is the discussion of some conspiracy, such as the assassination of a tyrant or the concoction of a revolt. The address began with a string of high-flown encomiums on 'the fair and beauteous bride of Baronshaugh,' and Christian heard herself successively likened to a bird, 'an opening gowan wet with dew,' and a young angel. Mrs Cassillis, juvenile (junior, he meant), was never so happy, Mr Mungo Mauchline said, as when she was 'surrounded by the poor, the sick, the afflicted, the destitute, and the dying;' and it was her 'daily toil to make the weeping orphans' hearts to shout aloud for joy.' It was no small relief to Christian when the panegyrist passed from her to expatiate on the transcendent merits of 'the highly energetical lady of the illustrious minister of this mosst favoured parish.' Mrs Brackenburn bore her share with consummate composure. She would not smile, come what

might—not if Nestor should swear the jest was laughable. A rain of compliments next fell on the name of Ursula, who, it seemed, had been ‘limbs to the halt and maimed, and eyes to the blind.’

‘But you all know,’ said Mr Mungo Mauchline, clasping his hands in an ecstasy of admiration, ‘the shuperb young lady to wheech I am now referring, has been wedded to-day, and is no more fit to appear amongst us; wheech, though it is a sore grief to us all, shall be partly recompensed by the habeetual presence of the good lady who has set those mosst delecious bounties before you and me on this occasion. Miss Elvester of The Brae, her own self, has been injuced in future to shuperintend your studies and shupervise your seams.’ (Here Mr Mungo Mauchline paused, to give an opportunity for cheering, but his audience being slow to take the hint, he finally led off the applause himself.) ‘Now, boys and girls,’ he resumed, ‘there is a good few things I could advise you this evening; but I can onnly strike upon two or three of the mosst special scores. One leading pint

is : Smocking. James the Six used to utter the remark that he had no conceit of focks wheech makes a chimney of their mouths. It was a king said that, mind—a real, born, crowned king of Scotland, wheech also won possession of the English throne. But I myself once knew a well-doing young lad, though addicted to the pipe, and he had the notion of an uncommon fine lass of the name of Mery. He was backward, and that blate he did not exac'ly know how to declare hisself, till one night he joost sat down by the ingle side, and up he started with that mosst lively little ballad, “Tell me, Mery, how to woo thee!” Well, she took him at his word, and says she, “I winna ha’e a smocker, Wully lad ; but breck the pipe an’ we’ll agree.” So he brock the pipe, and Mery helped him, and they were jyned in marriage within the year ; and the last I heard of both the two of them was, that they had migrated to the Antipodees. There is another most important subjec’ wheech I have to bring before your nottice on this occasion, and that is : the Demon Drink. In veechus lit’rature you will read such-like

temptations as, "Fill, fill the flowing boul, until it does run over;" but my advice unto every boy and girl of you is, never rest the shadow of an eyelash on the intoxicating cup. There was once a woman in London wheech was a Jewess, and she ouned a pote. She gave the use-and-wont of this three-legged cooking apparatus to a neighbour; and when it was returned, there was a hole into the pote. The case went before a joodge and jury, and the woman that did nut belong to the pote took her sacred affidavid (wheech means—oh, well, whenever anny of you needs to take an affidavid, you shall know soon enough what it means)—took her sacred affidavid, I say, first, that she never gote the pote; second, that there was a hole into it when she gote the the pote; third, that there was no hole into it when she gave back the pote. I do not know what the cort said about it; but the pint of the storry is, that if that female had never filled the flowing boul, she would nut likely have brocken a hole into no neighbour's pote. I, even I myself, boys and girls' (taking off a glass of water at a draught) 'have

gone on the tottal-abstinence principles for this manny years. And if ill companions should ever temp' you to approch the flowing boul, joost have your answer ready,—“ Mr Mungo Mauchline was a tottal abstainer before *I* was born.” ’

‘ Oh, carry me out ! ’ came a voice from among the bonnet-knitters. Mrs Brackeburn rose and cast her eyes about among the forms, and her glance was stern and high, so that the laughter which had threatened to follow the impertinent sally was stifled.

‘ Cultivate higher diversions than these, Mr Mungo Mauchline continued. ‘ Poytry shall be above you, I suspec’ ; but cultivate music, boys and girls ; cultivate music. Nut rascal music-hall Govannies or Letrovators—these is not true music. But the harmonies which these competent ladies which have graced us by their presence on this glad occasion, discourse upon the piano at their own homes ; these, I think, is music ; yes, yes, yes !—*yes, yes !* But there is manny kyinds of musical instruments, from the organ even to the cornu-

copia ; and there is also the human vyce. The milkmaid goes singing, as she fills her pails ; the sailors sing as they heave their anchor from the raging deep ; and though I have never heard it myself, I oun, there is the music of the sphere. None of *you* ever heard tell of such-an-a-creature ; but you are always learning, boys and girls, always learning. The sphere is a famous objec' nigh the great river Nile, and—'

'Matilda, it is too much,' whispered Christian ; 'Jenny certainly never meant this.'

'Never mind,' rejoined Mrs Brackenburn equably ; 'sphere or sphinx, it is quite the same to these. As for the "total abstinence" part, I liked it very much myself.'

'Of course we want the drinking habits of our people reformed ; but how such a parody will do anything towards it, I can't see. It seems a shame to let him go on. Will you not find some excuse for stopping him now ?'

'Am I a dog, Christian, that I should do this thing ? How can I, with or without an excuse, stop him ?—I, who have had so

many sugar plums showered on me, and who am so little used to sugar plums? But listen, listen!’

‘I doubt nut one of you could mention to me what the great river Nile is celebrated for?’ Mr Mungo Mauchline, was saying. Not one could.

‘For his sources,’ cried the orator, emphatically. ‘Ay, but that is a subjec’ wheech has not been unravelled yet, for all so manny has been working at it. The fac’ is, one says this and one says that, very like the two gentlemen which met in the mediæval ages, and came to bad words about a shield on a country road. Now, here’s a chance for you! If anny of you can express to me what a shield is for, I will relate the spirity storry I have mentioned. I clean forgot it among the serious of humoursome little sketches with which I illustriated the magic-lantern.’

A moment’s blank silence.

‘Speak up!’ urged Mr Mungo Mauchline, in tones of bland encouragement.

Then a voice, which Mrs Brackenburn

recognised as that of her disciple, Tommy Gillespie, spoke up,—

‘For to kep the licks,’ it said, confidently.

‘Well, my little man, you are not so far from it either,’ granted Mr Mungo Mauchline, with a patronising nod. ‘A shield is to stave off the blows, as you say; or, in more shuitable phrases, to protec’ the warrior from the attackt of the enemy.’

And then, according to promise, he related the story of the knights’ combat; which, having finished,—

‘Finally and in one word,’ said he, ‘you none of you know what will become of you; some may circumnavigate the briny ocean, some may climb the North Powl, some may discover inventions, like Gallio wheech introjuced spectacles, or Hercules the astrologer, wheech first used microscopes, and some may follow most strange corses; but I truly joodge that nut one of you all shall forget this jyous and cheering occasion for ever and ever. I could tell a heap more storries, but the knock’ (pointing to the china timepiece) ‘werns me to stope; so, before we skail, I would only

in conclusion bid you wish health and wealth to the newly-married Mr and Mrs Berwick, and to couple it with a vot of grateful thanks to the kynd, benevolent lady wheech has fed you at this groaning bord, and to these other admired ladies that honour you by their esteemed presence on this remarkable occasion—a vot of thanks, boys and girls—loud, proud, and loang !’

Whether the burst of acclamation which followed was proud or not, perhaps only Mr Mungo Mauchline was competent to determine ; but assuredly it was loud enough ; and for length, it continued some time after the ‘admired ladies’ were well out of hearing. The master of ceremonies thereafter saw the company disperse ; but in such a state of mental elevation was he, that he failed to observe how, the room being empty, two waifs, cream of Laighbiold juvenile riff-raff, crept quietly in and secreted themselves in the bottom of a large portable wooden press, in which books, copies, and other educational appliances were stored.

The lamps were put out, the door was

locked, silence reigned. Then the marauders came forth from their lair, and having lighted a candle, straight proceeded to make merry, dancing round and round 'the jyful bord,' and greedily devouring the fragments of the feast. They were in the midst of proving how pleasant a thing bread eaten in secret is, when (such contingencies are so apt to attend stolen delights!) their enjoyment was suddenly interrupted from without. Mr Mungo Mauchline having in his loftiness of mind forgotten to carry away his china timepiece, was now returned, and he stood fumbling at the lock. To avoid shame, or worse than shame, punishment, the scapegraces blew out the candle and flung it, smoking as it was, into the open press; then, while Mr Mungo Mauchline, suspecting nothing, groped his cautious way forward, these sons of darkness escaped through the window, and were lost in the night.





CHAPTER XV.

LAIGHBIELD ILLUMINATED.

‘At first a glowing red enwraps the skies,
And borne by winds the scattering sparks arise ;
From beam to beam the fierce contagion spreads,
The spiry flames now lift aloft their heads,
Through the burst sash a blazing deluge pours,
And splitting tiles descend in rattling showers.’

ON getting home from the feast of unreason in the Wynd, Mrs Brackenburn turned her attention, not to any good works, nor even good words, but to a highly-spiced novel of the period. It was exciting, and it caught her interest, so that having once begun, she sat still till she had made a full end ; and the hall clock struck two when the minister’s wife rose from her dressing-room fire, stretched herself, and dropped back into real life. Then repentance

came, and the self-dissatisfaction which usually follows vigils of such a sort.

‘ This is charming,’ she reflected. ‘ And a nice person I am altogether, am I not ? Why cannot I take things in moderation, as a right-minded human being should ? ’

She was quite disposed to look at her conduct in the severest light, and it is impossible to say to what length her self-reproach might have carried her, had its course not been interrupted by some unusual commotion outside. At first she fancied that the sound must proceed from a band of villagers returning from an evangelistic service at Braidmoss ; for the Laighbield girls and their sweethearts thought nothing of walking many a mile o’ nights if any popular lay-preacher, such as Bounding Bill, were to address an assembly. But it soon became clear that the noise was not of a kind to be raised by people returning from a revival meeting. Hoarse shouts of men were heard, and women’s distressful cries, and there was an ever-increasing hubbub. Mrs Brackenburn opened her window-shutters and looked

out. That instant the matter was made plain. Beyond the high walls of the garden, in the direction of the village, floated a great palpitating crimson cloud, and a shower of golden sparks danced through the rising smoke. Forgetting that she was in her dressing-gown—forgetting everything—Mrs Brackenburn flew downstairs, unlocked the hall-door, and ran out.

‘Where?’ she inquired of a woman whom she met in the shubbery.

‘A’ the Wynd’s in ae lowe,’ replied Mrs Gillespie—for it was she. ‘Folk’s ettlin’ to save the wark, an’ we lippen on your lassies to gie’s the len’ o’ a when watering-cans.’

‘Surely,’ said Mrs Brackenburn. ‘Call the servants up to help you, and take whatever in the way of pitchers you can find.’

Then, just as she was, with slippers, dressing-gown, and unbound hair, she passed through the gate, crossed the road, and went on to a point from which she could look directly down on the scene of destruction.

That candle among the copy-books had kindled a grand illumination for Laighbiel'd.

All one side of the Wynd, with the exception of a single house at the further end of the tenement, was in a blaze, and that, too, would soon be as the rest ; man need not think to save it, every effort must be concentrated on Langbiggin's factory.

There was no fire-brigade, but in lieu of that, Laighbield had started from slumber and come to cast water on the flames. Two lines had been formed from the factory to the river ; water-vessels passed from hand to hand down one side to be filled, then up the other to be emptied. Yet, in spite of mutual and continued endeavour, the factory caught fire, and soon went blazing up with the merriest crackle of defiance, while owner, foreman, and work-people wasted their strength in vain. The tenants of the Wynd were supposed all to have turned out, both from the side which was on fire and the side which was only in danger ; but as Mrs Brackenburn looked, a woman appeared at a second-storey window of the last house in the burning row, and that woman was Mrs Choppin.

Now, Mrs Choppin was in the very essence

of her a stupid person—a person whose ideas were rudimentary and few. One of these ideas was, the necessity to a housewife's respectability of a show tea-service of china. So she had stayed behind her neighbours, that she might gather her 'tea-set' into her apron, and here she had it now, safe and sound. But, pitiful to tell, such was the confusion of her dull brain that, to save the precious cups and saucers from the flames, she came and dropped the entire lapful over the window. For a moment afterwards she stood still, staring blankly down, then she flung her apron over her head, and lifted the lament,—

'Wae's me, wae's me, for my denty cheeny cups and fletts!'

The crash had attracted attention below.

'Save us a'!' 'The wife's in a creel!' 'Haste ye, Betty, woman; come awa' down!' cried one and another in the crowd.

'Betty wants but an ace o' being a wanderer at best, but she maun ha'e pairted wi' ony wee wut she ever had,' came from Mrs Gillespie.

‘She will throw over her babies next, if nobody prevent,’ cried Mrs Brackenburn. And nobody else apparently being at leisure to prevent, she herself took it upon her to see that the china was not followed by the babies.

Presently, being called by name, Mrs Choppin unveiled herself, and thereupon beholding a lady in the doorway, she ejaculated,—

‘Murnfu!’

‘Where are your children?’ demanded Mrs Brackenburn.

‘At their granny’s,’ was the reply. ‘Hech, sirs! for my cheeny cups and fletts, and my bonnie gaucy punch-boul, and conceity crystal pourrie.’

‘It’s not your china and your cream-pot that you’ve got to think of now,’ said Mrs Brackenburn, ‘it’s your precious life. Come’ (laying a small firm hand upon the woman’s wrist), ‘no good is to be done by staying here any longer.’

Mrs Choppin blindly permitted herself to be led forth. But when they were on the

landing, a thought struck Mrs Brackenburn. What of Christina Kerr, who lived in the attic above? Mrs Choppin, interrogated, deponed,—

‘ I ken nocht o’ her. Na ; she ne’er gaed doun the stairs nane. She may be lyin’ in ane o’ her faintin’ fits, for aucht I ken.’

‘ We must see about it,’ said Mrs Brackenburn. And she turned at once, and climbed the narrow wooden stair.

Christina Kerr’s door was fast. No answer was given to either words or knocks. Knowing the nature and frequency of Christina’s illnesses, Mrs Brackenburn called upon Mrs Choppin to come up immediately : they must push open the door. Mrs Choppin came up. But how could the door be forced ? Not with unaided hands, most certainly. Was there a hatchet anywhere ?—an axe ?—a hammer ? Mrs Choppin supposed so, but, hopelessly dense woman that she was, could not remember where. Search had therefore to be made, and longer time than the searchers were aware of passed before they got what they wanted ; and again a while

slipped by before the door yielded to their attack. They had better have gone and besought help outside ; but it seemed to Mrs Brackenburn that much more time would be lost in that way than in this, and every moment was precious now.

When the panels gave way, and the besiegers could see into the beautifully-kept little room, it was but to find the garret tenantless. Any inmate of the Wynd except Mrs Choppin could have told that Christina Kerr had left Laighbield the evening before, to assist in making the 'braws' of some farmhouse bride in a neighbouring parish. But it was a pity that Mrs Choppin should on the present occasion have been behind the rest in knowledge of a neighbour's movements ; for while she and her companion had been engaged about their bootless undertaking, retreat had been cut off from below. The garret stair was wrapt in flames.

Those who had witnessed the catastrophe of the china and what followed, naturally enough assumed that Mrs Brackenburn and Mrs Choppin must have quitted the house

by way of the garden. So an immense sensation was created when cries for aid were heard, and through smoke, fire, and soot-flakes the minister's wife was seen at an open garret window. The manse servants shrieked in chorus. There was a general confused rush. Ejaculations, — questions, — suggestions. Vain any attempt to get through the entrance. If the house were to be left at all, it must be left by the window. But there was no fire-escape in Laighbiel, any more than a fire-brigade; nor was there even a ladder at hand long enough to reach so high. Plainly, the best that could be done was to stretch a plank across from the opposite roof. A plank was accordingly brought from a neighbouring wood-yard, and placed from window to window. It looked but a perilous path to safety—so narrow, and so sure to swing up and down with every slightest motion. Still, Mrs Brackenburn would have taken it, could she have persuaded her companion also to make the attempt. But Mrs Choppin was completely unnerved.

‘I could ne’er ha’e tried the like o’t a’ my days,’ she said, ‘an’ I daurna’, ‘deed I daurna’, noo.’

‘Must we then both be lost?’ asked Mrs Brackenburn.

‘Dinna’ leave me my lane!—dinna’ leave me my lane!’ she ejaculated.

‘I will not,’ said Mrs Brackenburn. ‘It was I who brought you into this position; I may not leave you in it.’

Still she continued to urge the practicability of at least making an effort for life. But the woman beside her was in a delirium of terror, and incapable of reasoning. One might as well try to persuade the fire itself as Mrs Choppin.

Meantime a mason had volunteered to cross the plank, and he emerged from the opposite window just as Mrs Brackenburn had fallen into a despairing silence. She saw him come out and commence his Blondin-like walk. She knew that in all probability only one could now be rescued; and life was sweet to her, and the instinct of self-preservation strong. But even so, she could

not, would not, look to herself and leave another woman to perish.

‘Try to listen to me,’ she said. ‘You want to be saved, don’t you? Well, yonder comes Andrew Hairshaw. He will take you across. Only, you must keep quite still; shut your eyes when he lifts you, and leave everything to him.’

‘But it is you he’s for, nae fear;’ wailed Mrs Choppin. ‘No a’e haet will he heed for the likes o’ me.’

‘Yes, but he will, if you do as I tell you. See; I am taking off my dressing-gown. You must put it over you. Now, let down your hair, and conceal your face with it. I don’t think you have been observed by anybody below. You are not very much taller than I am, and unless you speak, Andrew will be too hurried to know the difference. I am going out of sight. You stand just here.’

‘But oh, mem, what’s to come o’ yoursel’, gin I gang?’ said Mrs Choppin, forced for one instant to look beyond her own salvation.

‘ I may still have time to cross after you,’ was the reply. ‘ But anyhow you must go first ’ (there was a grand look in Mrs Brackenburn’s eyes as she said this): ‘ you have children ; I have none.’

The factory had been now abandoned. And Laighbield held breath and stood with straining eyes, to see what was going to happen here. The mason reached the burning house in safety—he was used to walking on high, and to precarious footholds—the real danger would be in coming back. There was a profound silence while the man was lost to sight for half a minute, and the most painful suspense as he re-appeared with his burden, and addressed himself to the return. The plank swayed at every step. He traversed it cautiously as a cat, but far less securely. About half-way, either owing to some motion on the part of her he carried, or some slip of his own, he nearly missed his footing, and all but over-balanced. What an intense thrill there was then ! Nothing nearly so exciting had been seen in Laighbield for many and many a day.

Looking steadily before him, he, having recovered himself, pursued his way through the air. It was but a short distance altogether ; yet to him it appeared most marvelously long. Indeed, he could nearly have sworn that it had an elastic property of stretching itself out and out, as fast as he went on. But ultimately the goal was reached, and as he delivered his fainting charge into the eager outstretched arms that awaited her, the people below raised a ringing shout ; a shout, however, which changed to a groan on its being discovered that it was not the minister's wife whom they had there, but only Betty Choppin. Mrs Choppin's life was as precious, maybe, if you came to reason about the matter, as that of Mrs Brackenburn ; but still—

How happened Betty to be disguised as Mrs Brackenburn ? and what had kept her and Mrs Brackenburn so long amid the burning ? and where was Mrs Brackenburn now ? But Mrs Choppin, lying in a swoon there, could by no means answer these or any other questions, and Andrew Hairshaw,

speaking according to his conviction, affirmed that wherever Mrs Brackenburn might be, she was not in the garret. She must have made the impossible attempt to escape by the staircase. No sane man, therefore, could believe that there was the slenderest hope of saving her now.

While the crowd, horror-filled, concluded that her doom was already sealed, Matilda Brackenburn came groping her way back to the window. She had by this time grown faint and giddy, so that it would be out of the question for her to steady herself on it, even should she succeed in reaching the plank. Nothing for her now, it seemed, but submission to her fate. And it was such a dreadful fate; and she who must face it was one on whom the winds had never been suffered to blow too roughly. She had been praying earnestly — for deliverance, if it might be; if not, for strength and resignation. And now, with her powerlessness to save herself, a numbing indifference crept over her senses; the crash of falling rafters and roar of devouring fire lost their terror;

the long blue tongues of flame which had begun to dart back and forward where the walls and flooring joined, did not concern her ; and the horrible curling smoke which gushed through every crack and crevice, just because it was robbing her of consciousness, ceased to oppress her.

‘ Alan will miss me,’ she murmured, dreamily ; ‘ poor Alan will miss me.’

Then she sank down before the window, and knew no more.





CHAPTER XVI.

A CONFESSION.

‘I am not merry, but I do beguile
The thing I am by seeming otherwise.’

WHILE Christian was so uneasily listening to Mr Mungo Mauchline’s height of nonsense, Dugald Urquhart called at Baronshaugh ; but, being told that the laird was not yet home, he went on to Dreichwinnock, leaving the message that he might be expected back sometime on the morrow. Dugald’s instant departure on learning that his cousin had not returned, might be rather unflattering to his cousin’s wife. That, however, the lady could forgive ; in fact, relief rather than resentment was her feeling about the slight ;—such a

wealth of prosiness as Mr Urquhart was master of, would in present circumstances be even less of a jest than the crack-brained eloquence of Mr Mungo Mauchline.

While Christian was not one of those gifted beings who can proudly sing, ‘My mind to me a kingdom is,’ she did like to be left to herself on occasion—and particularly so to-night. That her reflections were not of a cheerful description, must have been gathered from her tone at The Brae. Very far from cheerful they were, indeed. Her imagination was much too lively, and it was making her miserable.

Since she had begun to harbour misgivings about the overdue vessel, every successive hour added new intensity to the passion of her longing for Glen’s return, till now she had reached the pass at which she could neither eat nor sleep. She, too, sat long over her dressing-room fire that night; but there was no novel-reading for her. The awful dread that the delayed ship might never come to land, that she might never see her husband’s face again, possessed her;

so there she sat, as she had sat for the two nights previous, nursing her fears.

Not an echo of the commotion which broke the slumbers of Laighbield reached Barons-haugh; and as Christian did not even approach her window when at last she crept wearily to bed, she missed seeing on the sky the reflection of what was going on in the Wynd. Her down-lying could not well be described as a retiring to rest; for, though she had a few snatches of sleep, they were worse than wakefulness—she always opened her eyes with a start, and in great trouble—and she rose in the morning unrefreshed.

She would not have a curious maid about her, so waited on herself, and thus missed hearing of something that had happened since last night.

It wanted an hour of breakfast-time when she descended; and she went into the library, thinking to find vent for her distress in writing about it to her mother-in-law. But she had not got herself seated, when the sound she wanted most in the world to hear, her husband's voice, caused her heart to stand

still. Within the high arms of an old-fashioned black oak chair yonder in the shadow of the curtains, Glen had been watching her since she appeared. The heavy eyes and the languor, signs that his pretty flower was drooping somewhat (for want of tending, perhaps), were not lost upon him; but however much solicitude he might feel, he did not betray it yet. His tone was quite as cool as his words, when he rose and took his wife's breath away by inquiring,—

‘Well, Christian, how are you?’

With a start, she turned about, and a flash of light passed across her face as she saw Glen standing in bodily presence so near her. She took a quick, impulsive step towards him, but suddenly recollecting that it was not for her to greet her husband as another wife might, she checked herself. He must take the initiative. And seeing what was expected of him, Glen came to her at once.

‘Have I surprised you past speech?’ he said, taking her by the hand.

They trembled pitifully, those slight fingers; and he could not help noticing how

much thinner they were than when they had last lain in his.

She was glad to see him—if he only knew how glad! Yet his manner somehow prevented her from telling him so; he did not look, she thought, as if he would care to hear.

‘We’ve had a rough, long passage,’ he told her. ‘But I have travelled day and night since landing; and got home just after the servants had begun to be about, so had not to storm the entrance.’

‘Why was I not told?’ she said. ‘I should have liked to meet you.’

‘Thanks; that would have been too kind. I would not on any account have had you disturbed.’

Then he set a chair for her, and took one himself at a decorous distance, and was ready to give information, or to receive it, as required.

Half-an-hour since, Christian had been praying for her husband’s return. Yet, there he was, safe and well; and here was she, bitterly disappointed. During his absence from her she had persuaded herself, that from his manner at their re-union she

should be able to decide whether or not he had begun to feel towards her as a husband ought, and that if he did not then, he would never. Judging thus, it appeared that Glen had come back more indifferent than he went away. Formerly he used to be vexed and angry because his wife would have no meaningless love-making; now, instead of vexation and anger, there was the most equable acceptance of the situation, as if no other situation were either looked for or desired. From time to time before his departure, there had been signs which had seemed to point to hope; during the past solitary months hope had almost passed into belief;—and *this* was the end!

It was very hard on Christian, for she loved him—she loved him so. Yet hard as it might be, she was as much as ever resolved that she would put a brave face on the misery; if she could have no more from her husband, she would at least command his respect. So, pride helping her, she played with the breakfast which she could not eat, and resumed the friendly tone which she was so well practised

in, and which, truth to say, she was so unspeakably weary of, and fairly outdid her husband in cool, easy affability,—but with what an effort no one but herself would ever know.

In talking of things in general, of course they talked of Moncrieff, and in that connection the episode of the secret-drawer transpired. Glen remembered nothing about the letter; not he (nothing about the violets either, Christian supposed); but there had been a hundred thousand matters to think of at the time, and naturally an incident here and there would be forgotten. To refresh his memory the letter was produced. Yes; it did recur to mind now; but why he should have cared to preserve such a memento, he could not tell;—only because of the transcendent folly of it, he imagined.

‘You can recall the circumstances connected with this letter, no doubt?’ he said, not looking at Christian as he spoke, but at the superscription on the charred envelope—Moncrieff, though more unstable than water, wrote a boldly effective hand.

‘I can, but indeed there is nothing I would not rather talk about,’ she said.

Still gazing steadily at the envelope, Glen went on,—

‘It is above my reason ; I am not clever enough to comprehend your extraordinary way of regarding the mistake—it was no worse than a mistake, at most—that I made.’

No worse than a mistake ! If Glen could not comprehend Christian, quite as little could Christian comprehend Glen.

‘Do, please, let us get away from that subject,’ she begged ; ‘we have never found it do any good to discuss it, and it is always painful to me.’

Then he raised his eyes, and silently turned them upon her. The light had gone out of her face now. But it was such a charming face ; so proud too, with all its sweetness.

‘One would imagine that I had been guilty of some crying wrong towards you,’ he said at last.

She did not answer.

‘Our marriage has been a curious affair enough,’ he resumed. ‘It seems to suit you

to consider yourself wronged. There is no accounting for taste, I know ; but what *is* the pleasure of it, Christian ?'

Why would he keep harping on that theme ? Not because he really cared about the matter, Christian was certain. Of course not ; he had come home more indifferent than he had gone away. Well ; if he would pursue the unprofitable theme only to annoy her, on his own head be the blame of the bitter things she might be forced to say to him.

'And was I not wronged ?' she asked. 'Can you think that you were in the least justified in marrying me, only because you could not have your cousin ?'

Once she had not been able to speak out so plainly ; but there was a stony feeling at her heart this morning. Besides, she had grown familiar with the facts of the case now, and the mere utterance of them did not hurt her as it would have done when the discovery was fresh.

'Because I could not have my cousin !' Glen repeated slowly,— 'Could not have my cousin !'

She rose, and, throwing her head back, encountered the eyes that rested on her, with a gaze steady as their own. Christian could look the daughter of the Sea-kings as well as Ursula, when she was just put to it.

‘If, after marrying me, you had by chance got to know that I cared nothing for you, but all for some other than you, how should you have taken it?’ she inquired.

‘Not very meekly, I’m afraid,’ said he; ‘that other had need to have kept well clear of me, I fancy.’

‘Yes; and yet you find it so impossible to understand me. Though I discovered immediately after marriage that you loved not me, but your cousin Moncrieff, *I* should have taken it meekly. *I* ought to have accepted with gratitude any crumbs you were good enough to spare to me. It was mere unreasonable folly in me that I would not be thankful for crumbs when the alternative was starvation.’

‘So!’ he exclaimed softly, the truth evolving itself to him; ‘did my cousin do me the honour to class me among her lovers?’

This was an idle play of words. He needed no reply to the question, nor should have one.

‘Moncrieff is apt to make little mistakes at times,’ he went on. ‘Her word is not the best authority upon which to found one’s beliefs. And in this instance she seems to have credited me with filling a position I never even aspired to. If you will think of it, how very lover-like my conduct to Moncrieff has always been.’

‘I don’t say you love her now; I don’t believe you do; but you did love her when you engaged yourself to me; that is enough.’

‘It would be enough, if it were the case. But I have most emphatically to plead not guilty. It must have been in some former state of existence, if I ever loved Moncrieff.’

This was indeed news. But Christian could not grasp it all so suddenly.

‘It was because Moncrieff preferred her cousin Quentin to yourself that you ever came to me,’ she said.

‘Do you happen to have read this letter?’ asked Glen.

‘I read a letter that was not meant for me!’ she cried.

‘Oh, I beg your pardon! What do you know of its contents, I should have said?’

‘As much as Moncrieff told me, which was only the part about her engagement to Quentin. I needed to hear no more.’

‘Didn’t you! Why, it is just there that your mistake has come in. But if I had been aware earlier (I wish I had!) that you imagined it could be anything to me whether Moncrieff did or did not marry Quentin, I would have lost no time in undeceiving you. What I have all along believed has been, that you understood, through Moncrieff, how I by this letter became informed of what had one day passed between you and my Aunt Euphemia. Can you understand now?’

If Glen had been astonished on hearing that he once loved his cousin, Christian was even more astonished on hearing this. It was because he had believed she loved him that he had married her, not because he had

been thrown over by Moncrieff. Yes, she understood now; and she too wished that she had known earlier this that came so late. Her eyes had fallen again, and she interlaced her fingers tightly to conceal their tremulousness.

‘I have greatly misjudged you—forgive me—I am so very sorry,’ she said at intervals, as she could find words, however inadequate, in which to clothe her feelings.

He was not free from having misjudged her; and probably he also was sorry. However, he would not own that just now.

‘But you have not heard all,’ he told her. ‘What will you say if I make the confession that, though I was neither in love with Moncrieff nor any other woman when I came to you, I am hopelessly in love now? I couldn’t help myself; for I drifted into the depths not thinking how I went. We were merely friends at first—she that I tell you of and myself—but I saw her daily, and she was the most seductive of women, and any one can guess the rest. I cut off a lock of my darling’s hair the morning before leaving her,

while she was asleep, and—but what ails you, Christian?’

Well might he ask! Was she under some strong delusion?—was she losing her reason? Or was it Glen who was losing his, that he dared so audaciously to insult her? But she neither spoke nor stirred, only unclasped her hands and pressed one of them to her brow, as if to dispel the horror.

‘It is the prettiest hair possible,’ resumed Glen, half smiling, and quitting the decorous distance which had hitherto been between them—‘the very prettiest; though, perhaps, I should not expect *you* to say so. But did you ever see any like it?—excuse me,’ and he undid one of his wife’s coils, and as it fell, placed beside it the soft brown tress he had in his hand.

‘Why—why,’ breathed Christian midway betwixt tears and laughter, ‘it is—it is my own!’

‘It is my darling’s,’ said Glen. ‘There isn’t much of it, you see; I dared not take more, in case she should discover the theft. But I wonder—now she has discovered

it—if she will pardon me the rape of the lock?’

‘I will try very hard to forgive you,’ she answered after a while, smiling through unshed tears.

He thanked her for that; and then,—

‘Now to make an end of Moncrieff’s letter,’ he said; and the All-Fool’s-Day production was burned forthwith, no hand being scorched this time to recover it.

Christian was close beside her husband at the moment; she was very fair; her face, touched but not stained with tears, shone like a dewy flower; her lips were ever so sweetly tempting; and she was his darling—not a doubt of it! Yet Glen Cassillis would not break his vow.





CHAPTER XVII.

SURPRISING.

‘A hundred thousand welcomes : I could weep,
And I could laugh ; I am light, and heavy ; welcome.’

T is not altogether unpleasant to be laid aside from active service for a short time, not really ill, only a little tired or so. The gentle languor makes rest enjoyable ; while it is delicious to feel just once in a way, that nothing is expected of you—that even your own conscience frees you from some disliked task, which on other days you go to only from a strong sense of duty.

Such were the conditions under which Mrs Brackenburn passed the forenoon after the fire in the Wynd. She herself would have

it that she was none the worse of her fright and semi-suffocation ; but her husband, who had come home in the morning to find her famous, would not understand that, and authoritatively prescribed rest and quiet. The first she took on a couch in her comfortable little private parlour, the other she could by no means come at ; for though the general public was not admitted, exceptions kept treading one on another's heels the whole day through.

Among these, our lady of Baronshaugh. Christian arrived at the manse, prepared to find Mrs Brackenburn laid up—hardly able to speak, perhaps ; at all events, suffering visibly from nervous excitement. But not a bit of it ! Mrs Brackenburn, dressed with all her usual taste, was talking saucy nonsense to her husband, with little short of her usual vivacity.

‘ Is she not splendid ! Was it not noble ! I want to kneel before her,’ cried the visitor enthusiastically, as soon as she entered.

‘ It is hardly for me to extol her,’ said Dr Brackenburn, smiling ; but he had a look as

if he rather agreed as to the splendour and the nobility. 'As for kneeling, this' (wheeling a chair round to face his wife's couch) 'will be more comfortable, I think.'

'Now, do let me admire you,' said Christian, for Mrs Brackenburn was frowning with all her might. 'Don't you know you are at the very top of my private list of heroines in real life?'

'Save me from my friends!' ejaculated the heroine. 'Keep your admiration for your husband, dear Madam Cassillis, and if you're strongly inclined for kneeling, kneel to him, —or wait till I can join you, and we shall kneel together.'

Christian did not see the drift of this. Why, should she kneel to her husband? Why if she did so, should Mrs Brackenburn join her in the act?

'What did he say to you of his doings in the early morning?' it was asked.

Nothing whatever: Christian had heard of no doings in the early morning.

'Is it possible!' exclaimed Mrs Brackenburn.

‘ Captain Cassillis has not told you, then, to whom my wife owes her life ? ’ added her husband.

From Glen Christian had merely learned that he, attracted by the glare, had that morning gone on to Laighbiold instead of stopping at Baronshaugh, and that he had reached the Wynd in time to see Mrs Brackenburn’s escape. But she now heard how that escape had been effected ; how Glen, having come upon the scene just after Mrs Choppin awoke to utterance, had coolly waved aside all opposition, crossed the plank, snatched from amidst the burning the unconscious form which lay stretched below the window, and got clear of the house only one single instant before the roof fell in.

‘ That is the history of your husband’s doings,’ concluded Dr Brackenburn. ‘ And in saving a life so precious to me, at imminent peril of his own, Captain Cassillis has laid me under a weight of gratitude which words are wanting to give expression to.’

And never a syllable of all this had been hinted at by Glen. In the midst of her

abundant admiration Christian could not help remembering that oft-repeated assertion of Moncrieff's, that Glen *was* so very odd a man. Her heart went beating high, but what could she say. A woman cannot gracefully sing a paen in her own husband's praise. It was therefore decidedly a relief when by-and-by Mrs Brackenburn gaily changed the subject, saying,—

‘Alan, excuse me, but, in the politest way in which it can be done, I should like to suggest that though I appreciate you very much, you are just that sort of man before whom one can't have a comfortable gossip, or freely indulge one's fallen nature by pointing out moles in neighbours' eyes, while all the time there is a frightful beam in one's own. Oh! you can't think, dear, what a famous magnifying-glass a beam in the eye is for making plain to you the moles in the eyes of other people.’

So Dr Brackenburn took the hint and soon withdrew, leaving the ladies to their gossip.

‘I adore my husband, as all the world

may know,' laughed Mrs Brackenburn then ; 'but sometimes I like him best in his study. Christian Cassillis, listen ; I had a call from Dugald Urquhart this morning.'

'Oh, had you ! And for once he was drawn out of himself surely ?' said Christian.

'You fancy him, with horrent hair and uplifted palms, listing to my tale. Quite wrong. Dugald had such a tale of his own to tell, that mine had no chance of even faintly interesting him.'

'About his sister ?'

'Even so. Brava, Moncrieff !'

'Tell me then, is she safe ?'

'More than merely safe ; she is woo'd an' married an' a', Christian.'

'Oh ! oh ! and which of all her admirers has she loved enough to compromise herself for the sake of ?'

'Only Sir Leveret Landless, whose marriage with one of the daughters of Netherlaw had already been fixed. Moncrieff and Sir Leveret met at the Baillie Geddes's coast house a few months ago, became enamoured—madly enamoured—at first sight ; estab-

lished a secret correspondence' (Christian remembered the mysterious letter), 'saw there nothing left for them but either a run-a-way marriage, or "the gerave, the gerave." So they eloped very cleverly, and while Dugald has had his emissaries prying high and low and afar for Moncrieff, she and Sir Leveret have been discreetly hidden away in some London fastness. But they are tired of seclusion now and anxious to shake hands with society; so Moncrieff writes asking Dugald if it will be safe to face the light of day and the wrath of the Baillie Geddeses. It follows that Dugald is making a circuit of his friends, to tell us that we must not say or think anything more about the romantic little episode, since he himself is perfectly content to accept so satisfactory an end to the matter.'

'And is he content to think of the girl whom Moncrieff's husband has forsaken?' wondered Christian.

'My dear Mrs Cassillis, how innocent you are! What is a forsaken girl to a man who hears that his sister has just become my

Lady Leveret ; sister-in-law of the Countess of Cornrig, that is ! Still, I must confess, Dugald's complaisancy in that fact did make me long to tell him that I considered the whole affair most shameful. But I opportunely remembered my husband's last Sunday's text : " He that ruleth his spirit is better than he that taketh a city," so did not let drop one of all the disagreeable things which by turn trembled on the very tip of my tongue. I suppose Dugald thought it was awe of his reflected honour which silenced me.'

' Honour !' echoed Christian ; ' it is a disgrace ; no matter for the Countess of Cornrig.'

' Of course it is. Somebody (Madame de Sevigné, is it ? I forget) says that cousins are one's natural enemies. I don't know about that, but I do know I am thankful that Moncrieff is only a far-off cousin of mine. I should have to go into sackcloth and ashes, were we cousins of the first degree ; as it is, I shall get off with a slight complimentary trimming of sackcloth, and

may let the ashes alone. But we've been cheated out of a good deal of honest anxiety ; and I, for my part, as much resent being cheated in that way as in any other. Don't you feel aggrieved, Christian ?'

'That did not strike me,' replied Christian.

'No? Well, you are looking all manner of scorn ; but what have you got to say?—or are your sentiments of the convenient kind,—"more easily imagined than described?"'

'I am glad Moncrieff is safe and well,' returned Christian ; 'as for the rest, I believe I had best not speak. There will be people enough to do that, won't there?'

'Most surely. When Moncrieff's day of trouble comes, Eliphaz the Temanite, Zophar the Naamathite, and Bildad the Shuhite will not one of them fail her. But I think we may leave her to her happiness for the time ;—there are those near at hand who want all the thought we can spare to-day.'

Christian knew it. She had already been to the Wynd, and had seen the idle work-

people wandering about the heap of blackened ruin sometime called the factory.

‘Jenny is looking after the most helpless ones,’ she said. ‘So busy she is! she had hardly time to say good-morning to me when we met, a little while ago. Glen has authorised me to head a subscription list ; for, of course, we shall want as much money as can be had.’

‘I am truly glad to know that Miss Elvester is up and doing ; and I shall be grateful for your subscription (yes, indeed, money will be wanted!) ; and I wish Princess Ursula were unmarried, and here with a strong fit of duty on her, that she might be sent to and fro in the parish, and up and down in it, collecting. But we must have talent as well as money ; talent to make money by. And even so soon as this I have had some generous offers. Mr Mungo Mauchline is going to print a poem (at his own expense) : subject, “The Fire ;” proceeds to go to the fund in aid of the sufferers.’

‘Oh ! but you won’t let him, Matilda ?’

‘ Nothing will prevent him, Christian. Only I know I shall have to buy it up, to save myself from the inextinguishable laughter of all my enemies. That other genius, Dugald Urquhart, has also put himself at our disposal. His idea is a dramatic entertainment. Hamlet he would have, with—shade of Shakespeare hear it!—himself in the principal part. There would be a case for you, in which Hamlet *would* be improved by leaving Hamlet out! I didn’t say that to Dugald; but I delicately suggested that Laighbiel isn’t yet educated quite up to the Hamlet pitch, and would probably like light comedy better. Dugald was afraid that in all classes there live and flourish puny souls who will sooner listen to some vulgar farce than to the most inspired breathings of the Immortals. We ended by a compromise: Laighbiel is to be spared Hamlet entire, and treated instead to a selection of readings from the great dramatists. Fair fall the night!’

Christian was privately of opinion that she would not be one of the audience on such a night. Earlier in her history she had heard

enough of Mr Urquhart as a reader to serve her for life.

‘Our new light of science, Dr Rhubarb-son’s assistant, is another volunteer,’ continued Mrs Brackenburn. ‘A lecture on chemistry is to be his contribution. A cutting which he showed me to-day, from the *Intelligencer* of the last town where he practised healing, tells how Dr Goloshe delivered his popular lecture on chemistry ‘with all his known wit.’ Wit as an outcome from chemistry will at least have a novel effect, and a delightful, I should say. Laughing-gas will likely be a principal agent in the experiments. In private life this young professional’s wit is of the sort that makes him wonder whether Cassillis the laird is any relation of Castles in the Air—a kind of funniness that isn’t very telling, perhaps.’

While she had been speaking a phaeton had rounded the shrubbery, and now from it alighted Mr and Mrs Carnegy of Braidmoss.

‘Alack and well-a-day!’ exclaimed Mrs Brackenburn, with a comic gesture of de-

spair. 'Am I meek enough? Have I anything of a chastened expression?'

Christian, who had risen to go, took a survey of the little figure before her, from the bonny brown hair, that tempted one to stroke it, to the tiny foot, that looked as if Cinderella's slipper might well have fitted it.

'No; there is not one touch of meekness anywhere about you,' she said.

'That is sad,' replied the other, 'because those people will hold that there ought to be. But, Christian, let me tell *you*, at any rate, that however I may seem outside, I am very, very full of gratitude at heart. I can't think without trembling of my nearness to death during those few awful minutes.' (Her voice had dropped, and her face gathered gravity enough.) 'And if I do make merry to-day, instead of practising phrase-making, my laughter is not very far from tears.'

But the Braidmoss visitors were being shown in, so having received a whispered message for Glen, and a warm caress herself, Christian departed, leaving in her room Mr and Mrs Carnegie.



CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION.

‘ Upon thy cheek I lay this zealous kiss,
As seal to this indenture of my love.’

FROM the manse Christian hurried to The Brae ; for she had something of importance to relate. Not to tell about Glen’s bravery, or Moncrieff’s marriage ; these were piper’s-news by this time ; but to communicate a thing so startling that it could not even be hinted at when she and her sister had spoken for a minute in the Wynd.

Miss Elvester was found seated in her pretty drawing-room, looking so cool and undisturbed that you would not have guessed how much her clear head had planned that

morning ; how much her capable hands had carried out. Active woman as this was, nobody ever saw her in a bustle ; neither were her friends ever oppressed by her business ; *they* did not have to suffer because of it ; she seemed always to have abundant leisure for them.

‘ This is indeed flattering,’ she said, when Christian came in. ‘ How could you spare us half-an-hour to-day ? ’

‘ This is your birth-day, Jenny.’

‘ I am deeply aware of that painful fact. Have you anything fresh to say upon the subject ? ’

Instead of a direct reply, Christian said,—

‘ You have no idea how Glen admires you. He thinks you are the most—’

‘ That will do, my dear ; when I want to know what Glen thinks of me, I shall be sure to ask. So don’t make my character a pretext for talking about your husband. There is no need of an excuse. Behold me waiting to hear with delight all you would like to say.’

‘ Isn’t Jenny such a singular person ? ’ said

Ulrica, who had hailed Christian's advent with pleasure, as a means of escape from the practising of scales. 'She will not listen to praise; that is one of her greatest idiosyncrasies.'

She stumbled slightly over the last word, however, and Miss Elvester exclaimed,—

'Hurrah, Ulrica; you have managed it! though that was a narrow escape you made. Now then, Christian, I am all attention; pray you, proceed.'

She did not expect her sister, so invited, to proceed; but Mrs Cassillis of Barons-haugh was so steeped to the lips in sunshine to-day, that one could not help quizzing her just a little.

'Glen—' began Christian; then paused.

'Is the grandest man the world e'er saw,' supplied Miss Elvester. 'Yes; we know it. Well, what more?'

'Glen sends a message to you, Jenny. It was he who bought Easttravoe; and he makes you a present of the title-deeds. He left the business in his lawyer's hands when he went

away ; but I have known nothing about it until this forenoon.'

All the playful mockery had gone out of Miss Elvester's face ; it became deadly pale, and for a moment Christian thought that her strong, self-reliant, resolute sister was fainting.

She sprang forward to give support. Ulrica rushed for the carafe, and was in the act of pouring its contents over Miss Elvester, when Miss Elvester herself stayed the proceeding, saying,—

'There, there ; I am all right. I have never fainted in my life, nor shall I now. Give me a glass of water, please ; don't deluge me with it.'

But she was not 'all right' yet. She could scarcely steady her hand sufficiently to raise the glass to her lips.

'It was all my fault,' said Christian, as she hung over her with anxious solicitude. 'I should not have told you so suddenly ; but, dearest Jenny, forgive me. I did not know how very much you cared.'

'Not know how much I cared !' ejaculated

Miss Elvester in a low tone, and she got up and left the room.

Her sisters perceived now how they had mistaken her in supposing that she had borne the loss of Eastravoe more lightly than they; they felt now that their grief had been mere noisy petulance compared to hers.

When Miss Elvester came in again, Christian was saying,—

‘So it has all turned out as you would have it, dear. Jenny is once more Miss Elvester of Eastravoe.’

‘How could Glen be so very, very magnificent to us?’ said Ulrica in reply.

‘For his wife’s dear sake,’ observed Miss Elvester. And her sisters saw that she was looking like herself again.

‘For Jenny’s own dear sake,’ amended Christian.

‘But, my good child, listen to me: I can’t think of taking such a gift from any man, even though that man is your husband,’ said Miss Elvester.

‘You and he can settle about that,’ replied Christian. ‘When Glen takes up an idea he

can be as determined as you ; even as you, Jenny. But who has so often spoken to us about our pride, and the sin and folly of it ? Now, what would it be but pride that would make you refuse to accept of Easttravoe ? ’

‘ Yes, ’ cried Ulrica ; ‘ what would it be but pride ?—but *pride*, Jenny ? ’

And for once Miss Elvester’s girls had the best of an argument with her.

‘ Oh, it was glorious of Glen ! ’ said Ulrica, as Christian was going away ; ‘ you kissed him a thousand times for it, I hope ? ’

‘ Not even once, ’ she answered ; ‘ wasn’t it ungrateful of me ? But you and Jenny are coming to Baronshaugh this evening, and you will make up for my deficiencies. ’

Happy Christian ! the heavens shone more brightly for her than for any other this afternoon. It was well worth, she thought, to have lived so long in the shadow. But for that, she would not have felt, as she did to-day, how exquisite a blessing was the light. People whom she passed on her way remarked that it was easily seen the laird was back ; and even Dugald Urquhart, whom she

encountered riding villageward through the avenue, was struck by her appearance. She had always been pretty, but really she had bloomed into actual beauty to-day. He did not waste words on her for all that ; even if she had not in her own person offended him, she was the sister of Ursula, a crime never, while recollection lasted, to be condoned.

Bowing ceremoniously in his saddle, he said,—

‘Ah, how do you do ? I have been informing Baronshaugh ’ (he would not say ‘Glen,’ as being too familiar for the occasion, nor ‘Cassillis,’ as being too free-and-easy, nor my ‘cousin,’ as being too feminine, nor ‘your husband,’ as making Christian’s position in the family too prominent ; ‘Baronshaugh ’ was exactly the thing he wanted)—excuse me, no ; I cannot turn back with you—I have been informing Baronshaugh of my sister’s marriage to Sir Leveret Landless. He will doubtless furnish you with the details, which I am too hurried to afford at this moment. I am obliged to be at Craigie Urquhart to-

night. Sir Leveret and Lady Landless will arrive there—so I am advised by telegram—in the course of to-morrow, and a suitable reception must be prepared.’

‘What a relief it must have been to you to hear of Moncrieff’s safety,’ said Christian, not at all seeing her way clear to be otherwise congratulatory.

‘I presume there has never been any question as to her safety,’ replied the brother of the sister-in-law of the Countess of Cornrig; ‘Lady Landless has been with her husband from the time of her leaving Netherlaw.’

And with a parting obeisance, as stately as the restive steed under him would permit of, he bade his cousin’s wife good-bye, and rode forth on his way. . . .

* * * * *

Half-an-hour later Glen Cassillis sat alone in the library. Tired out, he had begun to wander in the vague borderland between sleep and waking.

‘A pleasing land of drowsy-head it was,
Of dreams that wave before the half-shut eye;
And of gay castles in the clouds that pass.’

Resting himself there, he was not conscious of any one's approach, till the whisper,—

‘Glen, Glen, I am so proud of you!’ caressed his ear, a pair of soft arms stole about his neck, and a pair of yet softer lips just touched his cheek.

It was indeed the lightest, shiest kiss, as if a summer breeze had blown a few rose-petals against his face. No matter. Sooner than one takes to record it, Christian, all flushed and radiant, was fast in a close, strong clasp.

‘You yield at last!’ Glen cried triumphantly. ‘But, sweet, my wife, do you call *that* a kiss? I shall have to teach you how it must be done; so—’

But much love-making is a weariness to any onlooker. Quick!—let the curtain fall.

THE END.





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